

KAREN NEW YORK TIMES  
BESTSELLING AUTHOR  
KINGSBURY

ONE TUESDAY  
MORNING

TWO BOOKS IN ONE

BEYOND TUESDAY  
MORNING



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# DIE DINSDAGOGGEND- OMNIBUS

EEN DINSDAGOGGEND ...  
EN DIE LEWE DAARNÁ

*NEW YORK TIMES - TOPVERKOPER - OUTEUR*

KAREN  
KINGSBURY



## ZONDERVAN

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# DEDICATION

To Donald, my prince charming. When I wrote about Jake Bryan, I was writing about you—a man whose love for God is the heartbeat of all he does, all he says. All he is. I thank God that you are that kind of man, and that I am blessed to call you mine. I pray that our days together will always be the light they are today, and that I will continue to follow your lead, as you follow Christ's.

To Kelsey, my little Norm, our precious teenager. The other day I remembered a time when you and Katie and Jentry were walking into kindergarten together. You were just the way I've made Sierra to be in this book—long golden curls and a smile that left a mark on everyone it touched. The beautiful thing, honey, is that you're still like that. I love that you are a one-in-a-million girl. You are the laughter in our home, Kelsey. I love you always and forever.

To Tyler, my special boy. Watching you grow up I am often moved to silent awe—not an easy place (especially if you ask your dad). Handsome and tall, eyes set firmly on the goals you have for tomorrow. How many ten-year-olds want to star on Broadway, produce Hollywood films that are pleasing to God, and still write novels as a hobby? We all know the answer. Tears fill my eyes when I look to the day—dangling out there in the not-so-distant future—when the theme to *Annie* won't play constantly in the background. But for now, I'm savoring every note, memorizing every crazy thing you say and do, and knowing that God has a special plan for you. And remember what you mean to me. I'll always love you, always believe in you, always pray for you ... my oldest son. Hold on fast to Jesus, buddy. He knows the way from here to there.

To Austin, my miracle boy, who's gotten so big this past summer. Just a few more months and our time together will be over, little one. In the fall you'll join the whirlwind with the others—off to school. But for now you and I still have what feels like endless mornings of give-and-go on your plastic indoor basketball hoop. “Make it higher, Mommy ... I'm Michael

Jordan, remember?" Yes ... I remember. And when you score seven goals in a soccer game as you did last week, I know without a doubt that God is smiling at you. Was it five years ago that the doctor rushed you into surgery and told us there was something wrong with your heart, when he told us you might not live to see your fourth week of life? Even the doctors are amazed at how well you are now, how you have not a trace of the heart problem you suffered back then. Lucky, they say. Very lucky. But we know the truth, don't we, MJ? God gave you back to me, and I am grateful for every single morning. I love you, Austin. Always and always.

To EJ, my first chosen son. You have grown in leaps and bounds since coming to live with us from Haiti. We thought we were going to bless you by giving you a place in our home. But that wasn't how it worked out. The blessings have been all ours ... watching you go from a frightened, helpless child to a self-sufficient, articulate little boy. God is the one who brought us together, and I pray you hang on to Him every day of your life. He has huge plans for you, son. I love you, EJ.

To Sean, my happy silly-heart. You are so easily pleased, so happy to be here. I remember when you told me that one day you'd get a job and save up some money. "So I can give it to you, Mommy ... for everything you and Daddy have done for me." What I told you then is the same thing I want to tell you now. Just love God, Sean. Nothing would make me happier in the years and decades to come than to watch you love God the same way you love Him now. Don't forget about all the gifts He's given you ... I love you, Sean.

To Josh, our gentle giant. You are easily the fastest boy at school, the strongest in any game you play. Yet watching you is like watching an adult among children—you have that same gentle quality, that patience and kindness. I see it especially when you play with Austin, letting him win and even more, letting him think he's won. That takes a special type of confidence, a rare gift. You can do whatever you want to in life, Joshua. God has blessed you that greatly. Always remember that your abilities

come from Him ... and know that I love you forever and ever.

And to God Almighty, the Author of Life, who has—for now—blessed me with these.

***Aan Donald, die prins van my drome***

Wanneer ek oor Jake Bryan skryf, skryf ek oor jou – ’n man wie se liefde vir God die kern is van alles wat hy doen, alles wat hy sê. Alles wat hy is. Ek dank God dat jy daardie soort man is, en dat ek so geseënd is om jou vrou te wees. Ek bid dat ons lewe saam altyd die lig sal wees wat dit vandag is, en dat ek jou sal bly volg soos jy Christus volg.

***Aan Kelsey, ons kosbare tienerdogter***

Ek het nou die dag aan die tyd gedink toe jy en Katie en Jentry saam in die kleuterskool was. Jy was presies soos klein Sierra in hierdie boek – met jou lang, goue krulhare en ’n glimlag wat niemand onaangeraak gelaat het nie. Die beste, my skat, is dat jy nog steeds so is. Jy is ’n uitsonderlike meisiekind. Jy is die vreugde in ons huis, Kelsey. Ek sal jou vir ewig en altyd liefhê.

***Aan Tyler, my spesiale seun***

Om jou te sien grootword, voer my dikwels na ’n plek van stille verwondering – ’n uitdagende plek vir jou ma (vra maar jou pa). My mooi, lang seun met oë vasgenaël op die doel wat jy vir môre het. Hoeveel tienjariges wil op Broadway gaan optree, Hollywood-rolprente vervaardig wat die Here behaag en as stokperdjie boeke skryf? Ons almal ken die antwoord. My oë raak vol tranes as ek aan die dag dink wanneer *Annie* se temalied nie meer konstant in die huis gespeel sal word nie. Maar voorlopig verlustig ek my in elke noot, memoriseer ek elke lawwigheid wat jy sê en doen, en weet ek dat God ’n spesiale plan vir jou het. Onthou wat jy vir my beteken. Ek sal jou altyd liefhê, altyd in jou glo, altyd vir jou bid ... my oudste seun. Hou vas aan Jesus, Tyler. Hy weet hoe om die wenstreep te haal.

***Aan Austin, my wonderwerkjie***

Jy het die afgelope somer so groot geword. Oor net ’n paar maande gaan ons tyd saam verby wees, kleinding, wanneer jy in die herfs saam met die ander skool toe moet gaan. Maar vir eers het ek en jy soggens steeds ure se pret met jou plastiekbasketbalnet. “Maak dit hoër, Mamma ... ek’s Michael Jordan, onthou?” Ja ... ek onthou. En wanneer jy, soos tydens verlede week

se sokkerwedstryd, sewe doele aanteken weet ek dat God vir jou glimlag. Ek kan nie glo dis al vyf jaar sedert die dokter 'n noodoperasie op jou moes uitvoer nie. Toe hy vir ons kom sê het daar is fout met jou hart, en dat jy dalk nie sou leef om jou vierde week te sien nie. Vandag is die dokters verstom oor hoe gesond jy is, oor die feit dat daar nie eens 'n teken van destyds se hartprobleem is nie. Gelukkig, sê hulle. Baie gelukkig. Maar ons weet van beter, nè, my skat? God het jou vir my teruggegee en ek is dankbaar vir elke liewe sekonde. Ek is lief vir jou, Austin. Vir altyd en altyd.

### ***Aan EJ, my uitverkorene***

Jy het met rasse skrede gegroei sedert jy uit Haïti by ons kom bly het. Ons het gedink ons seën jou deur vir jou 'n plek in ons gesin te gee. Maar dit het andersom gewerk. Dis vir ons 'n groot seën om te sien hoe jy ontwikkel het vanaf 'n verskrikte, hulpelose seuntjie tot 'n selfstandige, uitgesproke mannetjie. God is die een wat ons bymekaargebring het, en ek bid dat jy elke dag van jou lewe aan Hom sal vashou. Hy het reuse planne vir jou, my seun. Ek is lief vir jou, EJ.

### ***Aan Sean, my liewe, lawwe kind***

Jy is tevrede met so min, so bly om hier te wees. Jy het eenmaal vir my gesê dat jy eendag 'n werk gaan kry en geld gaan spaar. “Dan kan ek dit vir julle gee, Mamma ... vir alles wat Mamma en Pappa vir my gedoen het.” Ek wil weer vir jou sê wat ek daardie dag vir jou gesê het. Wees net lief vir die Here, Sean. Niks sal my gelukkiger maak as om te sien dat jy altyd so lief vir die Here is as nou nie. Moenie van al die gawes vergeet wat Hy jou gegee het nie. Ek is lief vir jou, Sean.

### ***Aan Josh, ons sagmoedige reus***

Jy is maklik die vinnigste seun by die skool, die sterkste in enige wedstryd waaraan jy deelneem. En tog, om na jou te kyk, is soos om 'n volwassene tussen kinders dop te hou – jy het daardie selfde teenwoordigheid, geduld en sagmoedigheid. Ek sien dit veral wanneer jy met Austin speel, wanneer jy hom laat wen en meer nog, hom laat dink hy het gewen. Dit verg 'n spesiale soort selfvertroue, 'n seldsame gawe. Jy kan enigiets in die lewe doen wat jy wil, Joshua. God het jou so ryklik geseën. Onthou altyd dat jou talente van Hom af kom ... en weet dat ek jou vir altyd en altyd sal liefhê. ***En aan God die Almagtige, die Outeur van die lewe, die Een wat my met hulle almal geseën het.***

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A book of this magnitude does not come together without an enormous amount of research and assistance. For that reason, there are several people I must thank before getting into the story of *One Tuesday Morning*.

First, a humble thanks to the firefighters across the nation who courageously do their job on our behalf; and especially to the brave members of the FDNY. I have used a fictitious New York station in this novel, and also a fictitious Engine and Ladder company. But the truth is it could have been any of those in Manhattan and the surrounding areas. A special thanks to FDNY Press Secretary David Billing for helping me with determining fictitious Engine and Ladder companies, and for helping me accurately depict certain FDNY details. Also a heartfelt thanks to firefighter Brian Baum and dozens of others who lent priceless insight and accuracy to this novel. I count you among my heroes and friends.

As in the past, I want to thank Dr. Bryce Cleary for helping me have a true picture of the medical side of what my characters went through in *One Tuesday Morning*. You are my honorary doctor, and I enjoy giving you cameos in the stories that grow in my heart.

Thanks, also, to my editor at Zondervan—Dave Lambert. I am blessed beyond measure to have the privilege to work with you in this novel. The book it is today is proof that you are gifted in what you do. In that same vein, a thanks to the others at Zondervan, and especially to my amazing cover designer—Kirk DouPonce of Uttley-DouPonce Designworks. I've said it before, and I'll say it again. People judge a book by the cover, and I can only pray the story measures up. You are amazing!

A thank-you to my agent, Greg Johnson. There isn't enough space here to adequately thank you for all you do, Greg. I treasure our friendship, trust your judgment, and easily leave my career in God's hands and yours. I'm still grateful beyond words for that CBA luncheon when Terri Blackstock told me about you. Nothing has been the same since.

Thanks also to my special friends—the ones who encourage me and pray for me. Sylvia and Walt Walgren, Anne and Ron Hudson, Vicki, Joan, Kathy, Melinda, John, Robyn, Rick, and many, many more. Please keep praying, friends. I need you now more than ever. A special thanks goes to my family as well for understanding the extra hours I put in on this novel. I believe the end result has been well worth it ... and I look forward to the time we'll have together in the coming weeks. You guys are the best!

And, of course, a special thanks to my parents and my sister, Tricia, for helping me down the stretch while I edited *One Tuesday Morning*. I am grateful for your servant hearts in helping me through what would otherwise have been an impossible time.

Finally, a special thanks to God for giving me the story of *One Tuesday Morning*. When I wrote the last page, there were tears on my face, and I raised my hands upwards. Because a novel like this one could only have come from Him.

## Bedankings

'n Lywige boek soos dié word nie geskryf sonder 'n reuse hoeveelheid navorsing en hulp nie. Om hierdie rede is daar verskeie mense vir wie ek wil dankie sê.

Eerstens 'n nederige dankie aan die brandweermanne in Amerika wat ter wille van ons hulle werk doen; en veral aan die dapper lede van die brandweer van New York (FDNY). Ek het 'n fiktiewe brandweerstasie vir hierdie roman geskep, asook 'n fiktiewe Enjin- en Leer-eenheid. Dit kon egter enige stasie in Manhattan of die omringende areas gewees het. 'n Spesiale dankie aan die departement se perssekretaris David Billing wat my met die daarstelling van 'n fiktiewe stasie, asook die akkurate beskrywing van sekere besonderhede gehelp het. Ook my opregte dank aan Brian Baum en dosyne ander brandweermanne wat onskatbare insig en akkuraatheid aan hierdie roman verleen het. Ek beskou julle as my helde en vriende.

Soos in die verlede wil ek ook vir dr. Bryce Cleary bedank vir sy insette rakende die mediese sy van dit wat my karakters in *Een Dinsdagoggend* ... deurmaak. U is my eredokter, en ek geniet dit om u kamee-rolle in my verhale te gee.

Dankie ook aan my redakteur by Zondervan – Dave Lambert. Ek is besonder



bevoorreg om saam met jou aan hierdie roman te kon werk. Hierdie boek is bewys dat jy begaafd is in jou werk. In dieselfde asem, 'n dankie aan die ander mense by Zondervan, en veral aan my ongelooflike voorbladontwerper – Kirk DouPonce van Uttly-DouPonce Designworks. As 'n mens 'n boek op grond van sy voorblad beoordeel, kan ek maar net hoop dat die verhaal self nie teleurstel nie. Jy is ongelooflik!

'n Dankie aan my agent, Greg Johnson. Hier is nie genoeg plek om jou behoorlik te bedank vir alles wat jy doen nie, Greg. Ek waardeer jou vriendskap, vertrou jou oordeel, en sal my loopbaan sonder huiwering aan God en aan jou toevertrou. Ek is steeds onuitspreeklik dankbaar as ek aan die CBA-dinee dink waartydens Terri Blackstok my van jou vertel het. Sedertdien was niks dieselfde nie.

Dankie ook aan my spesiale vriende – almal wat my aanmoedig en vir my bid. Sylvia en Walt Walgren, Anne en Ron Hudson, Vicki, Joan, Kathy, Melinda, John, Robyn, Rick en vele meer. Moet asseblief nie ophou bid nie, geliefdes. Ek het julle nou nodiger as ooit. 'n Spesiale dankie aan my gesin wat nie kla oor die ekstra ure wat ek aan hierdie boek afgestaan het nie. Ek vertrou dat die eindresultaat die moeite werd sal wees ... en ek sien uit na die tyd wat ons in die komende weke saam gaan geniet. Julle ouens is die beste!

Dan natuurlik 'n spesiale dankie aan my ouers en my suster, Tricia, vir julle aanmoediging terwyl ek die manuskrip geredigeer het. Ek is dankbaar vir julle diensbare harte wat my deur 'n tyd gehelp het waardeur ek andersins nie sou kom nie.

Laastens 'n spesiale dankie aan God wat vir my hierdie storie gegee het. Terwyl ek die laaste bladsy geskryf het, was daar trane op my wange en het ek my hande na Hom toe gelig. Want 'n verhaal soos dié kon net van Hom af kom.

# A NOTE TO THE READER

To write a novel rooted in truth, an author must take certain liberties. I did that with *One Tuesday Morning*. Certain events—for instance the funeral of the unnamed probational firefighter detailed early in the book—were changed for the purpose of the story line. In reality firefighter Michael Gorumba, twenty-seven, suffered a heart attack and was remembered on September 1, 2001, at a St. Charles Catholic Church service in Staten Island, not on September 2, in Manhattan as my novel depicts. Other such changes to true events occur in a minor sense only.

For the most part I've tried to write my novel within the confines of the tragic reality of the events that took place around September 11. *One Tuesday Morning* does not pretend to be a novelization of the tragedy that happened in Manhattan that terrible day. Too much of what took place with the terrorist attacks is not covered in this novel for that to be the case. Rather, I drew from hundreds of firsthand accounts, news stories, personal interviews, and other research. In the process I created a story that truly could've happened, given the multiple cases of amnesia caused when the World Trade Center collapsed.

*One Tuesday Morning* is my way of grieving through all the events of September 11.

Out of respect for the New York City Fire Department and the real heroes who fought and in many cases died on September 11, I've created for the purpose of this novel a fictitious fire station, along with fictitious Engine and Ladder companies. Any similarities to actual FDNY firefighters or fire stations is purely coincidental.

**Aan die leser**

Met die skryf van 'n roman wat op die waarheid gebaseer is, moet 'n skrywer haar sekere vryhede veroorloof. Ek het dit met *Een Dinsdagoggend* ... gedoen. Sekere gebeure – soos die begrafnis van die junior brandweerman aan die begin van die boek – is ter wille van die storielyn aangepas. Die sewe-en-twintigjarige Michael Gorumba is aan 'n hartaanval oorlede en sy roudiens is op 1 September 2001 in die St. Charles Catholic Church, gehou, nie op 2 September in Manhattan soos in my roman beskryf word nie. Ander soortgelyke wysigings van die ware gebeure is slegs in 'n mindere sin aangebring.

Ek het hoofsaaklik probeer om my roman binne die grense van die tragiese gebeure te skryf wat rondom 11 September 2001 plaasgevind het. *Een Dinsdagoggend* ... is nie 'n poging om die tragedie wat op daardie verskriklike dag in Manhattan plaasgevind het, tot 'n roman te verwerk nie. Daar het te veel rakende die terroriste-aanvalle plaasgevind wat nie in hierdie boek gedek word nie. Ek het uit honderde eerstehandse vertellings, nuusberigte, persoonlike onderhoude en ander navorsing geput. In die proses het ek 'n verhaal geskryf wat werklik kon gebeur het, gegewe die veelvuldige gevalle van geheueverlies wat ná die ineenstorting van die World Trade Center voorgekom het. Hierdie boek is my manier om die gebeure van 11 September 2001 te verwerk.

Uit respek vir die New Yorkse Brandweerdepartement en die ware helde wat gestry en in baie gevalle gesterf het, het ek vir die doel van hierdie verhaal 'n fiktiewe brandweerstasie met fiktiewe Enjin- en Leer-eenhede geskep. Enige ooreenkomste met regte New Yorkse brandweermanne of -stasies is bloot toevallig.

# Chapter ONE

SEPTEMBER 2, 2001

There were too many funerals.

Jamie Bryan locked eyes on the casket anchored atop a specially fitted slow-moving New York City fire truck, and that was her only thought. Too many funerals. So many that this one—like those before it—was steeped in tradition: the haunting refrains from fifty bagpipes, the white-gloved salute, the lone bugler sounding taps, the helicopter passing overhead. Jamie knew the routine well. Hundreds of dignitaries and several thousand uniformed firefighters lined Fifth Avenue outside St. Patrick's Cathedral, the same way they'd done five times already that year.

A sad melody lifted from the bagpipes and mingled with the early September wind.

“I hate this,” she whispered without moving.

Her husband stood a few inches away, tall and proud, his blue uniform pressed crisp, right hand sharply at attention near his brow. He squeezed her hand. No words came, no response to her statement. What could he say? Funerals were part of the job. Sometimes ten a year, sometimes twenty. This year was the lightest yet. Only six so far—six men like Jake who went to work for the FDNY one morning and never came home.

The funeral music swelled, and Jamie Bryan could feel the walls, feel them growing and building within her. The first bricks had been with her since the beginning, back when she first considered marrying a New York City firefighter.

Back when she and Jake Bryan were just twelve years old.

“I'm never leaving New York City.” They'd been playing tag with neighbor kids outside his house one day that summer. Everyone else had gone in for dinner. “I'll be FDNY like my daddy.” Certainty shone from his

eyes as they made their way onto his front lawn. "Puttin' out fires and savin' people."

"That's fine for you." She'd dropped to the ground and leaned back on her elbows. "When I grow up I'm gonna live in France." She stared at the hazy humid New York sky. "Artists live there."

"Oh yeah?" Jake flopped down beside her. "Before or after you marry me?"

She lowered her chin to her chest and raised her eyebrows at him. "What makes you think I'd marry you, Jake Bryan?"

"Because ..." He twisted his baseball cap and shot her a grin. "You love me. And you always will."

That had been it, really. They didn't date until high school, but after that summer Jake Bryan had been the only boy for her.

"What do you see in him?" Her father peered at her over the top of his newspaper the day after her eighteenth birthday. "He'll never be rich."

Jamie had rolled her eyes. "Money isn't everything, Daddy."

"But security is." Her father let the newspaper fall to the table. "You'll get neither from Jake."

Anger had flashed like lightning across Jamie's heart. "How can you say that?"

"Because." Her father had rested his forearms on the table, his expression softer. "It's a tough job, fighting fires in New York City. The danger's always there, Jamie, as close as the next call." He gestured in the direction of Jake's house. "Look at his mother. She lives with the danger every day. It's in her eyes, part of who she is. That'll be you one day if you marry Jake Bryan."

Her father and Jake's were both Staten Island men, hardworking New Yorkers who made the commute to Manhattan every day. But the similarities stopped there. Jake's father, Jim, was a fireman, a chaplain who always had something to say about God or the importance of faith.

"What good thing has the Lord done for you today, Jamie?" he'd ask,

grinning at her with piercing blue eyes that would light up the room.

Jamie was never sure how to answer the man. She had no practice at giving God credit for the good things in life. Small wonder, really. Her father, Henry Steele, was an investment banker who had built a small financial empire with nothing more than brains, determination, and self-reliance. At least that was his explanation.

Their family had lived in the same house where Jake and Jamie and their daughter, Sierra, lived today. In an elite section of Westerleigh, not far from the Staten Island Expressway and the ferry ramps. The sprawling two-story colonial had a finished basement and a built-in pool in the backyard. Back then Jamie and her sister had been friends, just two years apart and living the charmed life of summer beach parties and winter vacations in the Florida Keys.

All of it compliments of Henry Steele's hard work and ingenuity.

God got no credit at all.

"A man doesn't need anyone but himself," he would tell Jamie and her sister. "Religion is a sign of weakness." Then he'd shoot a pointed look at Jamie. "Of course, when a person fights fires in New York City, faith might be a necessity."

And so Jamie waited month after month for something terrible to happen to Jake's father. But in the end it had been Jamie's father, not Jake's, who died the tragic death. One evening when her parents were driving home from the ferry, her father lost control at the wheel, careened off the road, and wrapped their car around a telephone pole. By the time paramedics arrived at the scene, both her parents were dead. Jamie was twenty that year, her sister, eighteen.

Their parents carried a million dollars' life insurance each, and a lawyer helped the girls work out an agreement. Jamie got the family house; Kara got a full ride to Florida State University and stocks. They were both given enough savings to last a lifetime, but no amount of money could stop the arguments that developed over the next few years. An ocean of

differences lay between them now. It had been five years since they'd spoken to each other.

Three years after the death of her parents, Jamie remembered her father's warning about Jake's job as she stood by and watched him graduate with his fire science degree. Weeks later he was hired by the New York Fire Department. The next summer Jake and Jamie married and honeymooned on a Caribbean cruise, and since then Jamie hadn't been more than a hundred miles from the East Coast.

But she no longer wanted to travel the world. Sights from a dozen exotic countries could never rival the pleasure she felt simply loving Jake Bryan.

"You don't have to work, you know ..." Jamie had mentioned the fact to Jake just once—a month before his first shift with FDNY. "We have enough money." Jake had bristled in a way she hadn't seen him do before or since.

"Listen. Fighting fires in New York City is part of who I am, Jamie. Deep inside me." His eyes held a hard glint. "It's not about the money."

The bagpipes stopped, and a sad silence hung in the air.

A bugle cry pierced the quiet morning, and the lonely sound of taps filled the street. Jamie stared at the coffin again. The dead man had been a proby, a probational firefighter still serving his first year with the department. This time deadly smoke, fiery flames, and falling ceiling beams weren't responsible.

The man's engine company had simply responded to an auto shop on fire. For several minutes the proby worked a massive hose reel at the side of the engine, then he climbed back into the cab. His buddies found him not long afterwards, slumped forward, dead of a heart attack at twenty-seven years old. Just five months after graduating top of his class.

He was the fourth fireman to suffer a fatal heart attack in ten months.

The bugle rang out its last note, and in very little time, the sea of blue began to break up. Jamie and Jake held hands as they made their way back



to his pickup truck and headed home to Sierra.

*Sierra ...*

The image of their four-year-old daughter filled Jamie's heart and for a moment dimmed the deep ache there. Sierra had Jake's blue eyes and Jamie's trademark dimples. No one knew where Sierra had gotten her blonde silky hair, but she was a beauty, inside and out. Days like this, Jamie could hardly wait to hold her, to soak in the warmth and hope of her precious laugh. The girl had held both their hearts captive since the day she was born.

Jamie stared out the truck window.

Manhattan smelled of warm bistros and cabbie exhaust fumes. It didn't have a downtime. The sidewalks teemed with people as much now as they would on a weekday. She keyed on a couple about the same age as she and Jake, dressed for business, walking briskly toward some lower Manhattan destination. The two exchanged a smile, and for a fraction of a second, Jamie wondered, *Do they know about the dead fireman? Do they spend time pondering the fact that men like Jake are willing to die for their safety?*

Jamie shifted and slipped her hand into Jake's. *Of course they don't. Unless they know a firefighter or police officer, unless they regularly attend the funerals, why would they?* She leaned back in her seat and looked at Jake. The silence between them was heavy, and words didn't come until they hit the ferry docks.

"When's the last time you had your heart checked?"

Jake glanced at her. "What?"

"Your heart." She swallowed and tried to find a neutral tone. "When's the last time you had it checked?"

"Jamie ..." Understanding flooded his eyes. "I'm fine. There's nothing wrong with my heart."

"I'd rather have the doctors decide."

"Honey, heart attacks are part of life." He worked his fingers a little

more tightly between hers and kept his eyes on the road. “Not just for firemen.”

She stared out the window again and let the air ease from her lungs. Did he always have to read her mind? Couldn't she keep even a little fear to herself? He would never be honest with her as long as he knew she was afraid. Every time he sensed her concern, he had the same answer. *Not me, Jamie ... I'll be careful ... nothing'll happen ... And now this. There's nothing wrong with my heart ...*

They pulled into line at the Whitehall terminal and inched their way onto the ferry. When they'd driven up as far as they could, Jake slipped the truck into park and faced her. His voice was a gentle caress. “I'm sorry.”

She turned to him. “For what?”

“For the funeral.” He bit his lip. “I know how much you hate them.”

A cavernous pit of sorrow welled within her, but she wouldn't cry. She never did, not in front of him, anyway. “It's not your fault.”

“You could stay home next time.” He reached out and loosely gripped her knee. “Lots of wives do.”

“No.” She gave a quick double shake of her head. “I'd rather go.”

“Jamie ...” The ferry gave a slight lurch and began to move across the harbor.

“*I would.*” She gritted her teeth. “It reminds me what I'm up against.”

“Come on, baby.” A chuckle sounded low in his throat, one that was weighted in empathy. “When are you going to stop waiting for something bad to happen?”

“When you work your last shift.” Their eyes met and desire stirred within her. They'd been married nearly a decade, but he still moved her, still made her want to hold on to him an extra minute or two every time they came together.

He leaned over and kissed her, the slow passionate kiss of a love that didn't happen in spurts, a love that colored every page of a life they'd written together. He moved his lips along her cheekbone toward her

earlobe. "Ten years is too long to worry."

"Nine."

"Nine?" He drew back, and his little-boy expression almost made her laugh.

"Yes. You're almost thirty-six, Jake. You said you'd retire at forty-five like your father. That's nine years."

"Okay, nine. It's still too long to worry. Besides ... I love what I do." Without waiting for a response, he worked his fingers up beneath her rayon blouse and pressed his thumbs against her ribs. "Almost as much as I love you."

She squirmed and couldn't contain a giggle. "Stop it!"

"Anyway, you're worrying about the wrong thing." He tickled her once more, and when she twisted free, he held his hands up in surrender.

"Oh yeah." She caught her breath and straightened her shirt. "What am I supposed to worry about?"

"Beating me at tennis."

"Okay." She forced a sarcastic laugh. "I could try to worry about that."

"What? Is that arrogance in my fair damsel's voice?" He stifled a grin. "You beat me in three sets last week, and now I'm no challenge? Is that it?"

She let her head fall back and she laughed, this time without reservation. "Okay ... I'm worried, Jake."

"Good. And don't forget—today's Sierra's first lesson."

"Here we go." Jamie could feel the sparkle in her eyes. "She's four, Jake."

"Martina Hingis was probably four when she picked up a racket."

Jamie's laughter rang through the cab. "You're crazy."

"About Sierra, yes." Jake's smile faded some. "I don't know what I'd do without her." He took her hand. "Or you."

"Me either." She settled against the door of the truck, still facing Jake. "Sierra's perfect, isn't she?"

Jake stared out at the harbor, and his eyes grew distant. “Being a dad has given me these feelings ...” He angled his head. “A love I can’t describe.”

Jamie smiled, slow and easy. The cry of the bagpipes faded from her memory, and one by one the clouds of fear lifted, breaking up like morning fog over the water. Jake was right. Worrying did no good. Especially when every day held so much life for their little family.

“Come on.” Jake opened his truck door and motioned for Jamie to follow. She did, and the two of them walked to the front of the ferry, found a quiet spot against a railing, and turned to face the receding New York skyline.

“It’s breathtaking every time.” She stared past the Statue of Liberty and lifted her eyes to where the World Trade Center towered over the rest of lower Manhattan. “You’ve been on every floor, haven’t you?”

“Of the Twin Towers?” Jake squinted and gazed up at the tall buildings. “Probably. Jammed elevators, chest pains, faulty wiring in the office coffeemaker.”

“And the bombing.” She lifted her chin and studied his face. “Don’t forget about that.”

“Yeah.” He lifted one shoulder. “But the fire was out before we got there.”

“Still ... it was scary. I remember it like it was yesterday.”

“The towers are safe, Jamie. Stairwells run down three sides.” He narrowed his eyes and looked back at the buildings. “It’s the old warehouses and abandoned factories. Those are scary.”

“I know.” She gripped the railing behind her and studied the city again. After a moment she shifted her gaze to him. “I’ll try not to worry so much. Okay?”

He slipped his arm around her and kissed the top of her head. “Okay. Besides, who of you, by worrying, can add an hour to his life?” He paused. “That’s from the Bible.”

Jamie let the comment pass. Letting go of her fear was one thing. Claiming some sort of help or understanding from an old leather-bound book of ancient letters was another. But to say so would only upset Jake. And the day was too beautiful, their time together too short for that.

“I love you, Jake Bryan.” She slid her arms around his neck, letting herself get lost in his embrace. “I’m sorry for being afraid.”

“I know.” He kissed her again, this time more slowly. The ferry was less crowded than usual, and they had privacy in the place where they stood. When he pulled away, he searched her eyes. “I’m not going anywhere, Jamie. God and I have a little deal, a secret.”

“Is that so?” She tilted her face and batted her eyelashes at him. “I don’t suppose you’ll share it with me.”

“Nope. But I can tell you this much. God isn’t finished with me yet.” He brought his lips to hers once more. “And He’s not finished with you, either.”

They held hands as they returned to Jake’s truck and climbed back inside. Fifteen minutes later they pulled into their tree-lined neighborhood and the same familiar street where they’d grown up. This was home. The quaintness of the island, the way she knew every front yard, every family that made up this part of Westerleigh.

The old house was gray now with white trim, but it was still much the same as it had been when Jamie grew up there. They pulled in the drive, and the moment they walked inside, Sierra ran to them, her eyes lit up.

“You’re home!” She stretched her hands up toward Jamie. “Oooh, Mommy. You look pretty.”

“Thanks, baby.” Jamie swung her up into a hug and nuzzled her cheek against Sierra’s. She smelled nice, like baby powder and maple syrup.

Jake paid the sitter, and when she was gone, the three of them moved into the living room.

“Did you and Daddy go to church?”

The question poked pins at Jamie’s good feelings. Before she could

answer, Jake came up alongside them. "Hey, little girl." He took Sierra into his arms. "How was your morning?"

"We had pancakes." Sierra rubbed noses with Jake and giggled. "Did you and Mommy go to church?"

"Sort of." Jake twirled one of Sierra's curls around his finger. "It was a special church meeting for one of the firemen at Daddy's work."

"Oh." Sierra searched his eyes. Her golden hair shimmered against her blue T-shirt. "Did he do something good?"

Jake tilted his head and hesitated long enough for Jamie to read his heart. "Yeah, baby." He pursed his lips and nodded, and Jamie felt the familiar ache from earlier. "He did something real good."

Sierra brought her chin to her chest and placed her hands on either side of Jake's face. "Is Mommy going with us *next* Sunday?"

Jake gave Jamie a quick smile. He never pushed her, just left it open. In case she ever changed her mind. Jamie cleared her throat. "Mommy has her painting class next Sunday, sweetheart."

"Oh." Sierra blinked at Jake. "But you'll take *me*, right, Daddy? Two times a month?"

"Right, honey."

"Because Mrs. Ritchie looks for me two Sundays at class time."

"Yep. Mrs. Ritchie won't be disappointed. You'll be there next week for sure."

"Goodie!" Sierra jumped down and made a quick wave in Jamie's direction. "I'm gonna check on Brownie. She slept in my bed this morning."

Brownie was their faithful lab. Eight years old and graying around her jowls, she was wonderful with Sierra and didn't mind wearing baby bonnets. The two of them were best friends. Jamie watched their daughter scamper off, and a thread of guilt sewed itself around the perimeter of her soul. She looked at Jake and gave him a crooked smile. "Thanks."

"For what?" A lazy grin tugged at the corners of his mouth. He

crossed the room into the kitchen and poured himself a glass of water.

She followed, her voice quiet. “For not making a big deal out of the church thing.”

“I’ll never push you, Jamie.” He took a swig of water and studied her. “You know that.”

“Still ...” She felt uneasy in a way she couldn’t quite pin down. “It means a lot.”

“No big deal.” He set the glass down. “I’m gonna change clothes. Tennis in half an hour?”

She leaned against the counter and felt her gaze soften. “Okay.”

“You over the fear thing?”

Jamie smiled. “For now.”

It wasn’t until she went upstairs to change that she caught sight of the mirror and stopped short. Who was she kidding? The worry wasn’t gone; as long as firefighters were dying it would never be gone. They had Sierra and each other and a life sweeter than she’d dared to dream. Jake’s job loomed as the single threat to everything that mattered.

Sometimes where Jake and Sierra were concerned, Jamie felt like a little girl again, building sandcastles on the beach, desperate to stretch the day, to make the sunny hours last as long as she could. Jamie could still see herself the way she’d been on sandcastle Sundays, giggling and skittering back and forth on the sand, chasing back the waves, believing somehow she could stop the tide from claiming her precious creation.

But in the end the waves would come. Always they would come. And when they did, they would wash away all she’d built. There hadn’t been a single thing she could do to stop them.

Her father’s long-ago words came back to her. *Look at Jake’s mother. She lives with the danger every day. It’s in her eyes, part of who she is. That’ll be you one day if you marry Jake Bryan.*

Jamie leaned closer and scrutinized her eyes. Her father had been right all along. When had her eyes stopped being the light-filled carefree



speckled brown of her childhood? Now they were dark and deep, and they'd taken on a new color, one that bore an uncanny resemblance to that in Jake's mother's eyes. The same color Jamie had seen in the eyes of a dozen other firefighter wives.

The color of fear.

## Een

2 September 2001

Daar is te veel begrafnisse.

Jamie Bryan se oë rus op die kis bo-op 'n stadig bewegende brandweerwa en dit is haar enigste gedagte. Te veel begrafnisse. So baie dat hierdie een – nes die voriges – in tradisie gedompel is: die klaende refrein van vyftig doedelsakke, die saluut van wit handskoene, die beuelblaser, die helikopter wat bo hulle verbyvlieg. Jamie is al bekend met die roetine. Honderde hoogwaardigheidsbekleërs en 'n paar duisend brandweermanne in uniform staan aan weerskante van Fifth Avenue voor St. Patrick's Cathedral, nes hulle reeds vyf maal hierdie jaar gedoen het.

Die doedelsakke se hartseer melodie hang dralend in die vroeë Septemberbries.

“Ek haat dit,” fluister sy sonder om te beweeg.

Langs haar staan haar man regop en trots, sy blou uniform vars gestryk, sy regterhand in 'n streng saluut. Hy reageer nie op haar stelling nie, gee haar hand net 'n drukkie. Wat moet hy sê? Begrafnisse is deel van sy werk. Soms tien, soms twintig per jaar. Hulle het hierdie jaar sover die ligste daarvan afgekom. Tot op hede was daar net ses – ses ouens wat nes Jake een oggend brandweerstasie toe is en nooit weer huis toe gekom het nie.

Die begrafnismusiek bereik 'n crescendo en Jamie Bryan voel hoe die mure binne haar verrys. Die eerste bakstene was van die begin af daar, sedert sy dit destyds oorweeg het om met 'n brandweerman te trou.

Toe sy en Jake Bryan maar net twaalf jaar oud was.

“Ek gaan vir altyd in New York bly.” Hulle het dié somersmiddag saam met die buurt se kinders jagertjie voor sy huis gespeel. Die res van die kinders is huis toe geroep vir ete. “Ek gaan 'n brandweerman word, soos my pa.” Die sekerheid het in sy oë geblink terwyl hulle oor die grasperk aangestryk het. “Ek gaan vure doodmaak en mense red.”

“Jy kan seker maar hier bly as jy wil.” Sy het haar op die gras neergevly en haar op haar elmboë gestut. “As ek groot is, gaan ek Frankryk toe.” Sy het in die soelwarm lug opgekyk. “Dis waar die kunstenaars bly.”

“O ja?” Jake het langs haar neergesak. “Voor of na jy met my getrou het?”

Sy het haar ken laat sak en haar wenkbroue gelig. “Wat laat jou dink ek sal met jou trou, Jake Bryan?”

“Want ... ” Hy het sy bofbalpet in die rondte gedraai en vir haar geginnik. “Jy’s lief vir my. En jy sal altyd wees.”

Hy was reg. Hulle het eers uitgegaan toe hulle op hoërskool was, maar na daardie somer was Jake Bryan die enigste ou vir haar.

“Wat sien jy in hom?” Sy het die vorige dag agtien geword en haar pa het bo-oor sy koerant na haar gekyk. “Hy gaan nooit ryk wees nie.”

Jamie het haar oë gerol. “Geld is nie alles nie, Pappa.”

“Maar sekuriteit is.” Haar pa het die koerant op die tafel laat sak. “By Jake sal jy nie een van die twee kry nie.”

Jamie was dadelik kwaad. “Hoe kan Pa so iets sê?”

Haar pa het met sy voorarms op die tafel gerus en sy uitdrukking het versag.

“Dis nie maklik om in die brandweer te wees nie. Die gevaar is altyd daar, Jamie, net ’n foonoproep ver.” Hy het in die rigting van Jake se huis beduie.

“Kyk na sy ma. Sy moet elke dag met daardie gevaar saamleef. Dit is in haar oë, dis deel van haar. Dis wie jy eendag gaan wees as jy met Jake Bryan trou.”

Haar en Jake se pa’s was albei Staten Island-mans, hardwerkende New Yorkers wat daaglik tussen hul huise en Manhattan gependel het. Maar dis waar die ooreenkomste opgehou het. Jake se pa, Jim, was ’n brandweerman, ’n kapelaan wat altyd iets oor God of die belangrikheid van geloof te sê gehad het.

“Wat het die Here vandag vir jou gedoen, Jamie?” Die glimlag in sy deурdringende blou oë kon ’n hele vertrek ophelder.

Jamie was nooit seker hoe om te antwoord nie. Sy het nooit geleer om die Here die eer te gee vir die mooi dinge in haar lewe nie. Dis ook geen wonder nie. Haar pa, Henry Steele, was ’n beleggingsbankier wat ’n finansiële ryk met net sy breinkrag, vasberadenheid en selfvertroue opgebou het. Dis in elk geval hoe hy dit gesien het.

Die gesin het in dieselfde huis gebly waarin Jake en Jamie en Sierra vandag woon – in ’n gesogte buurt in Westerleigh, nie ver van die Staten Island Expressway en die veerboothawe nie. Die ruim koloniale huis het twee verdiepings en spog met ’n volledig toegeruste kelder en ’n swembad agter die huis. Jamie en haar suster verskil net twee jaar en hulle was destyds beste vriendinne wie se rykmanslewe uit strandpartytjies in die somer en wintervakansies in die Florida Keys bestaan het.

Alles het van Henry Steele se harde werk en vindingrykheid getuig.

God was nêrens in die prentjie nie.

“’n Mens het niemand behalwe homself nodig nie,” sou hy vir Jamie en haar suster sê. “Godsdiens is ’n teken van swakheid.” Dan het hy Jamie ’n veelseggende kyk gegee. “Nou ja, as ’n mens ’n brandweerman in New York is, is geloof seker ’n noodsaaklikheid.”

Jamie het elke maand gewag dat daar iets verskrikliks met Jake se pa gebeur. Maar op die ou end was dit nie Jake se pa nie, maar Jamie s’n wat tragies

gesterf het. Toe haar ouers een aand van die veerboot af huis toe ry, het haar pa beheer oor die motor verloor, van die pad af gery en die motor teen 'n paal afgeskryf. Teen die tyd dat die ambulans daar aangekom het, was albei haar ouers dood. Jamie was twintig, haar suster agtien.

Elkeen van haar ouers het lewensversekering van 'n miljoen dollar gehad en 'n prokureur het die dogters gehelp om 'n kontrak op te stel. Jamie het die gesinshuis gekry; Kara se studies aan die Florida State University is betaal en sekere van die aandele is aan haar bemaak. Hulle albei het genoeg geld geërf om hulle 'n leeftyd te hou, maar geen geld kon opmaak vir die argumente wat die volgende paar jaar tussen hulle ontstaan het nie. 'n See van verskille lê vandag tussen die twee susters. Dis nou vyf jaar sedert hulle met mekaar gepraat het.

Drie jaar na haar ouers se dood het Jamie haar pa se waarskuwings oor Jake se werk onthou toe hy sy graad in brandwetenskap behaal het. 'n Paar weke later is hy deur die New Yorkse brandweer aangestel. Jake en Jamie het die volgende somer getrou en vir hulle wittebrood op 'n Karibiese bootreis gegaan. Sedertdien was Jamie nooit meer as honderd kilometer van die Ooskus af nie.

Maar sy het nie meer die begeerte om die wêreld te sien nie. Daar is geen eksotiese land wat by die geluk kan kom wat sy in haar liefde vir Jake Bryan ervaar nie.

“Jy hoef nie te werk nie, jy weet ...” Jamie het die feit net een maal opgehaal – 'n maand voor sy eerste skof by die brandweer. “Ons het genoeg geld.” Dit was die eerste en laaste keer dat Jake hom so vir haar vererg het.

“Luister, om brandweerman te wees is onlosmaaklik deel van wie ek is, Jamie.” Daar was 'n verbete glinstering in sy oë. “Dit het niks met geld te doen nie.”

Die doedelsakke word stil en 'n hartseer stilte hang in die lug.

Die beuelgeskal is skel in die stil oggend en eensame tromslae weerklink in die straat. Jamie kyk weer na die kis. Die oorlede man was 'n groentjie, 'n junior brandweerman wat nog nie sy eerste jaar in die brandweer voltooi het nie. Hierdie keer was dit nie die dodelike rook, vlamme of vallende dakbalke wat sy lewe geëis het nie.

Die man se eenheid het op 'n brand in 'n motorwerkswinkel reageer. Hy het 'n massiewe waterpyp-katrol langs die wa hanteer, en weer in die kajuit geklim. Sy kamerade het kort daarna op hom afgekom waar hy vooroorgeboë gesit het. Hy het op sewe-en-twintig aan 'n hartaanval beswyk. Net vyf maande nadat hy eerste in sy klas gestaan het.

Hy is die vierde brandweerman wat die afgelope tien maande aan 'n hartaanval dood is.

Die beuel se laaste note sterf weg en die blou see verdaag. Jamie en Jake loop hand aan hand na sy bakkie toe en klim in. Sierra wag by die huis vir hulle.

*Sierra ...* Die beeld van hulle vierjarige dogtertjie bring vir 'n oomblik verligting in Jamie se hart. Sierra het Jake se blou oë en Jamie se kuiltjies.

Niemand weet waar Sierra haar syagtige blonde hare gekry het nie, maar sy is lieflik, van binne en buite. Op dae soos vandag kan Jamie kwalik wag om haar vas te hou, om die warmte en hoop van haar laggie in te drink. Die oomblik toe sy gebore is, het sy albei haar ouers se harte vir ewig verower.

Jamie staar deur die venster.

Manhattan ruik na knus restaurantjies en uitlaatgasse. Dit raak nooit rustig nie. Die sypaadjies is vandag net so vol soos op 'n weeksdag. Haar oë kom tot rus op 'n paartjie van min of meer haar en Jake se ouderdom. Hulle is professioneel geklee en haastig op pad na die een of ander bestemming in Manhattan. Die twee glimlag vir mekaar en vir 'n oomblik wonder Jamie: *Weet hulle van die jong brandweerman? Dink hulle vir 'n oomblik daaraan dat mans soos Jake bereid is om ter wille van hulle veiligheid te sterf?* Jamie skuif op haar sitplek en neem Jake se hand. *Natuurlik nie. Hoekom sou hulle? Tensy hulle 'n brandweerman of polisieman ken, tensy hulle gereeld die begrafnisse bywoon.* Sy sit agteroor en kyk na Jake. Die stilte tussen hulle is swaar, en die woorde kom eers toe hulle die veerboothawe bereik.

“Wanneer laas het jy na jou hart laat kyk?”

Jake kyk na haar. “Wat?”

“Jou hart.” Sy sluk en probeer haar stem neutraal hou. “Wanneer laas het jy vir 'n ondersoek gegaan?”

“Jamie ...” Begrip daag in sy oë. “Ek is gesond. My hart makeer niks nie.”

“Ek sal beter voel as 'n dokter daarvoor besluit.”

“My lief, hartaanvalle is deel van die lewe.” Sy vingers verstyf om hare en hy hou sy oë op die pad. “Dit kan enigiemand oorkom, nie net 'n brandweerman nie.”

Sy kyk weer deur die venster en laat haar asem stadig uit. Hoe is dit dat hy haar gedagtes kan lees? Kan sy nie eens 'n bietjie vrees vir haarself hou nie? Hy sal nooit met haar eerlik wees terwyl hy weet dat sy bang is nie. Elke keer wanneer hy haar kommer aanvoel, het hy dieselfde antwoord. *Nie ek nie, Jamie ... Ek sal versigtig wees ... Niks sal gebeur nie ....* En nou dit. *My hart makeer niks nie.*

By die Whitehall-terminaal val hulle agter die ry motors in, en ry-stop, ry-stop tot op die veerboot. Nadat hulle parkeer het, draai Jake na haar. Sy stem is 'n sagte liefkosing. “Ek’s jammer.”

Sy kyk na hom. “Waaroor?”

“Oor die begrafnis.” Hy byt sy lip vas. “Ek weet hoe jy dit haat.”

Die hartseer wil haar verswelg, maar sy sal nie huil nie. Sy huil nooit nie, altans, nie voor hom nie. “Dis nie jou skuld nie.”

“Jy hoef nie volgende keer saam te kom nie.” Hy steek sy hand uit en vat liggies aan haar knie. “Baie vroue bly by die huis.”

“Nee.” Sy skud haar kop twee maal vinnig. “Ek wil eerder daar wees.”

“Jamie ...” Die veerboot ruk effens en kom in beweging.

“Ek wil.” Sy byt op haar tande. “Dit herinner my waarmee ek te kampe het.”

“Kom nou, my skat.” 'n Diep laggie kom uit sy keel, een vol empatie.

“Wanneer gaan jy ophou wag vir iets slegs om te gebeur?”

“Wanneer jy met jou laaste skof klaarmaak.” Hulle oë ontmoet en iets soos begeerte roer in haar. Hulle is al amper tien jaar getroud, maar hy laat haar steeds nie onaangeraak nie; sy wil hom steeds elke keer ’n minuut of twee langer vashou wanneer hulle bymekaar is.

Hy leun oor en soen haar, ’n talmende intieme soen van ’n liefde wat nie wispelturig is nie, ’n liefde wat elke bladsy van hulle lewensboek inkleur. Sy lippe beweeg oor haar wangbeen tot by haar oor. “Tien jaar is te lank om bang te wees.”

“Nege.”

“Nege?” Hy sit terug en sy seunsagtige uitdrukking laat haar amper lag.

“Ja. Jy is amper ses-en-dertig, Jake. Jy het gesê jy gaan soos jou pa op vyf-en-veertig aftree. Dis nege jaar.”

“Oukei, nege. Dis nog steeds te lank om bekommerd te wees. En buitendien ... Ek is lief vir my werk.” Hy wag nie vir ’n antwoord nie, maar leun weer nader en begin haar in haar ribbes kielie. “Amper so lief soos vir jou.”

Sy wriemel en giggel onkeerbaar. “Hou op!”

“Jy bekommer jou in elk geval oor die verkeerde ding.” Hy kielie haar nog ’n slag, maar toe sy loskom, lig hy sy hande in oorgawe.

“O, nè.” Sy kry haar asem terug en trek haar bloesie reg. “Waaroor is ek nogal veronderstel om bekommerd te wees?”

“Ons volgende tenniswedstryd.”

“O.” Sy gee ’n sarkastiese laggie. “Ek sal my bes probeer om bekommerd te wees.”

“Wat? Verbeel ek my of bespeur ek ’n tikkie arrogansie in die skone dame se stem?” Hy onderdruk ’n laggie. “Net omdat jy my verlede week in drie stelle geklop het, dink jy ek’s skielik nie meer ’n bedreiging nie?”

Sy lag kop agteroor, hierdie keer met oorgawe. “Oukei ... ek’s bekommerd, Jake.”

“Mooi. En moenie vergeet nie – vandag is Sierra se eerste les.”

“Hier gaan ons al weer.” Jamie kan haar oë voel glinster. “Sy’s vier jaar oud, Jake.”

“Martina Hingis was tien teen een ook vier toe haar pa haar eerste raket gekoop het.”

Jamie se lag rinkel deur die lug. “Jy’s onhebbelik.”

“En dol oor Sierra.” Jake se glimlag vervaag effens. “Ek weet nie wat ek sonder haar sal doen nie.” Hy neem haar hand. “Of sonder jou nie.”

“Ek ook nie.” Sy sit half met haar rug teen die deur. “Sy is my hart se punt.”

Jake tuur deur die venster, ’n veraf kyk in sy oë. “Vandat ek pa geword het, het ek al hierdie gevoelens ... ” Hy hou sy kop skeef. “’n Liefde wat ek nie kan beskryf nie.”

Jamie glimlag stadig en ontspanne. Die klank van doedelsakke vervaag uit haar geheue en haar vrees verdwyn soos oggendmis oor die water. Jake is reg. Dit help nie om haar te bekommer nie. Veral nie as elke dag soveel lewe vir

hulle gesin inhou nie.

“Kom.” Jake maak sy deur oop en wys Jamie moet saamkom. Hulle loop saam na die voorkant van die veerboot, kry ’n stil plek waar hulle met hulle rûe teen ’n reling gaan staan en kyk hoe die stadsilhoeët kleiner raak.

“Dit bly asemrowend.” Sy kyk verby die Vryheidstandbeeld na waar die World Trade Center bo die res van Manhattan uittroon. “Jy was al op elke vloer, nè?”

“Van die torings?” Jake skreef sy oë en kyk op na die hoë geboue. “Waarskynlik. Vir hysbakke wat vassit, borspyne, foutiewe bedrading in die kantoor se koffiemasjien.”

“En die keer met die bom.” Sy bestudeer sy gesig. “Moenie daarvan vergeet nie.”

“Ja.” Hy trek sy skouers op. “Maar die vuur was geblus voordat ons daar gekom het.”

“Tog ... dit was vreeslik. Ek onthou dit asof dit gister was.”

“Die torings is veilig, Jamie. Daar is trapkuile aan drie kante.” Hy vernou sy oë en kyk weer na die geboue. “Dis die ou store en leë fabrieke – dis waar die groot gevaar lê.”

“Ek weet.” Haar vingers verstyf op die reling agter haar terwyl sy weer ’n oomblik na die stad kyk voordat sy na hom draai. “Ek sal probeer om nie so ’n kommerkous te wees nie. Tevrede?”

Hy sit sy arm om haar en soen haar op haar hare. “Tevrede. Wie van ons kan in elk geval ’n uur by ons lewe voeg deur ons te bekommer?” Hy bly stil. “Dit staan in die Bybel.”

Jamie reageer nie. Om teen haar vrese te baklei, is een ding. Om een of ander soort hulp of insig uit ’n boek met antieke briewe te put, is iets anders. Maar dit sal Jake net ontstel as sy dit sê. En die dag is te mooi, hulle tydjie bymekaar te kort daarvoor.

“Ek is lief vir jou, Jake Bryan.” Sy sit haar arms om sy nek en verloor haar in sy omhelsing. “Ek’s jammer dat ek bang is.”

“Ek weet.” Hy soen haar weer, hierdie keer talmend. Die veerboot is leër as gewoonlik en op die oomblik is daar niemand naby hulle nie. Toe hy sy kop ophig, kyk hy soekend in haar oë. “Ek gaan nêrens heen nie, Jamie. Ek en die Here het ’n ooreenkoms, ’n geheim.”

“Is dit so?” Sy hou haar kop skeef en fladder haar wimpers. “En jy gaan dit seker nie met my deel nie, of hoe?”

“Nee. Maar wat ek jou wel kan sê, is dat God nog nie klaar is met my nie.” Hy soen haar weer. “En Hy is ook nie klaar met jou nie.”

Hulle loop hand aan hand na Jake se bakkie en klim in. ’n Kwartier later draai hulle by hulle boomryke woonbuurt in en ry in dieselfde bekende straat af waarin hulle grootgeword het. Dis hulle plek dié. Jamie ken elke voortuin en elke gesin wat in hierdie deel van Westerleigh op die ouwêreldse eiland woon. Die ou huis is nou ’n sagte grys geverf, die vensterrame wit, maar dis steeds baie soos toe Jamie daar grootgeword het. Hulle draai by die oprit in en die

oomblik toe hulle by die voordeur ingaan, kom Sierra met vonkelende oë op hulle afgestorm.

“Julle is terug!” Sy steek haar arms na Jamie toe uit. “Oo-ee, Mamma lyk mooi.”

“Dankie, liefding.” Jamie tel haar op en druk Sierra se sagte wangetjie teen hare. Sy ruik lekker. Soos babapoeier en stroop.

Jake betaal die oppasster en toe sy weg is, gaan hulle na die woonkamer toe.

“Was Mamma en Pappa kerk toe?”

Die vraag is soos ’n speldeprik, maar voordat Jamie iets kan sê, kom staan Jake by hulle. “Hallo, meisie.” Hy neem Sierra by Jamie. “Wat het jy vanoggend gedoen?”

“Ons het plaatkoekies gemaak.” Sy vryf haar neus teen Jake s’n en giggel.

“Was Pappa en Mamma kerk toe?”

“Soort van.” Jake draai een van Sierra se krulle om sy vinger. “Dit was ’n spesiale kerkbyeenkoms vir een van die brandweermanne by Pappa se werk.”

“O.” Sierra se oë kyk ondersoekend in syne. Haar hare blink goud teen haar blou T-hempie. “Het hy iets goeds gedoen?”

Jamie sien die seer in Jake se hart toe hy aarsel. “Ja, my skat.” Hy pers sy lippe opmekaar en knik, en Jamie ervaar weer die pyn van vroeër. “Hy het iets baie goeds gedoen.”

Sierra laat sak haar ken op haar bors en plaas haar handjies aan weerskante van Jake se gesig. “Gaan Mamma volgende Sondag saam met ons?”

Jake glimlag vinnig vir Jamie. Hy het nog nooit druk op haar geplaas nie; laat dit net aan haar oor. Vir ingeval sy ooit van plan verander. Jamie maak keel skoon. “Mamma gaan Sondae mos kunsklas toe, my liefie.”

“O.” Sierra knip haar oë. “Maar Pappa sal my saamvat, nè? Twee keer ’n maand?”

“Dis reg, my skat.”

“Want juffrou Ritchie wag elke tweede Sondag by die klas vir my.”

“Jip. Juffrou Ritchie sal nie verniet wag nie. Jy gaan definitief volgende week daar wees.”

“Lekker!” Sierra spring af en waai vir Jamie. “Ek gaan gou na Brownie toe. Sy het vanoggend in my bed geslaap.”

Brownie is hulle getroue labrador. Ten spyte van haar agt jaar en die grys om haar bek is sy ’n wonderlike, geduldige hond wat nie omgee om Sierra se popkappies te dra nie. Hulle is beste maats. Jamie kyk hulle dogtertjie agterna en iets soos ’n skuldgevoel pluk aan haar hart. Sy kyk na Jake en glimlag. “Dankie.”

“Waarvoor?” ’n Lui glimlag speel om sy mond. Hy loop kombuis toe en skink vir hom ’n glas water.

Sy volg hom, haar stem sag. “Dat jy nie ’n groot storie van die kerkding maak nie.”

“Ek sal jou nooit druk nie, Jamie.” Hy neem ’n sluk water en kyk na haar. “Jy weet dit.”

“Tog ... ” Sy kan nie haar vinger op haar skielike ongemak lê nie. “Dit beteken baie.”

“Dis niks.” Hy sit sy glas neer. “Ek gaan van hierdie uniform ontslae raak. Tennis oor ’n halfuur?”

Sy leun teen die toonbank en haar uitdrukking versag. “Oukei.”

“Voel jy nou rustiger?”

Jamie glimlag. “Vir eers.”

Dis eers toe sy opgaan om te gaan verkleed dat haar oog die spieël vang en sy vassteek. Wie probeer sy bluf? Die bekommernis is nie weg nie; solank daar brandweermanne is wat doodgaan, sal dit altyd daar wees. Hulle het vir Sierra en mekaar en ’n lewe wat haar mooiste drome oortref. Maar Jake se werk gooi ’n donker skadu oor alles wat saak maak.

Waar dit om Jake en Sierra gaan, voel dit soms vir Jamie asof sy soos ’n dogtertjie besig is om sandkastele op die strand te bou en desperaat probeer om die dag uit te rek, om die sonskyn so lank moontlik te laat aanhou. Jamie kan haarself steeds as ’n dogtertjie op Sandkasteelsondae sien; hoe sy giggelend oor die strand trippel en die branders terugjaag, asof sy kan keer dat hulle haar kosbare skepping opeis.

Maar uiteindelik het die branders altyd gekom. Altyd. En daar was niks wat sy kon doen om te keer dat hulle haar handewerk wegspoel nie.

*Haar pa se woorde kom na haar toe terug: Kyk na Jake se ma. Sy moet elke dag met daardie gevaar saamleef. Dit is in haar oë, dis deel van haar. Dis wie jy eendag gaan wees as jy met Jake Bryan trou.*

Jamie leun nader en kyk diep in haar oë in die spieël. Haar pa was reg. Wanneer het die lig en sprankel uit haar bruin oë verdwyn? Hulle is donker en diep, en hulle het ’n nuwe kleur aangeneem, een ontstellend baie soos dié van Jake se ma s’n. Dieselfde kleur wat Jamie in die oë van dosyne ander brandweerman-vroue gesien het.

Vrees.



# Chapter TWO

SEPTEMBER 4, 2001

Laura Michaels whipped around and ran smack into a giant mouse.

She shrieked, but the sound was lost among the roar of a hundred happy children. Taking a step backwards, she ran her hands down the rat's furry arms. She looked both ways to make sure none of the kids were watching. Then she leaned close and whispered in a loud voice. "Are you okay?"

The mouse nodded, and his oversized plastic head bobbed up and down. He lifted his paw and pointed to the melting ice-cream cake on a nearby table.

Laura gasped. "The cake!" She raked her fingers through her straight blonde hair and glanced at her watch. Seven o'clock. Eric should've been there an hour ago. She managed a smile and aimed her words through the mouth of the giant mouse so whoever was inside could hear her. "I'll get the boys and be right back."

The mouse nodded again and wandered off to another table.

Josh had wanted to celebrate his eighth birthday at Chuck E. Cheese's, and Laura and Eric had easily agreed. Laura could pick up an ice-cream cake, and the restaurant would take care of pizza and drinks. Josh and his friends would entertain themselves for hours, and there'd be nothing to clean up.

"Get there at five-thirty, and I'll be right behind you," Eric had promised earlier that afternoon. "No later than six."

It seemed doable. The restaurant was at the west end of the San Fernando Valley, just ten minutes from Eric's office in the heart of Warner Center. At first the afternoon had gone as planned. Six young guests had arrived at the Michaels' Westlake Village house and ridden with her thirty minutes on the Ventura Freeway to the pizza parlor.

But five-thirty had become six, and the boys had eaten their pizza with no sign of Eric. When they were finished, Josh and his friends fanned out into the game gallery while Laura snatched glances back at the front door. An hour passed, and without Eric, she had no one to help her round up the boys. Now she was standing guard over a melting ice-cream cake and leftover pizza balanced precariously atop a pile of unopened birthday presents.

*This is crazy ... where is he?*

Her silent words were more introspective than prayer, and Laura didn't wait for a response. She peered through the maze of children looking for any sign of the boys. Forget the cake and presents; they'd be fine without her for a few minutes. She took a few hurried steps toward the arcade area when suddenly she felt a hand on her shoulder. She spun around. "Thank goodness you're—" The sight of Eric's brother stopped her short.

"Where's Eric?" Clay Michaels leaned against the table and locked eyes with Laura. Clay had attended a small college in Missouri and had returned to Southern California a few months ago. He was a police officer, and he idolized his older brother.

"You've got it all, Eric," Clay had told him a few weeks ago. His tone had been light and not completely serious. But the admiration he had for Eric was evident. "You're a great husband, great father. The perfect guy with the perfect family."

Laura hadn't had the heart to set him straight. Besides, if he lived near them long enough, Clay would get a clearer picture of Eric soon enough. Times like this one were bound to expose Eric for what he was—a corporate climber with eyes for nothing but whatever lay at the top of the ladder.

She managed a quick smile. "He's ... he's late."

"For Josh's birthday?" Clay's eyebrows rose a notch. "What's keeping him?"

*The same thing that always keeps him*, Laura thought. “Work. He’s probably on his way.”

“Where’s Josh?” Clay snagged a piece of pizza from the pan and moved it off the stack of presents. “Looks like the cake’s about to give out.”

Laura shifted her gaze and stared hard at the mass of children in the arcade room. “He’s in there somewhere.” She looked back at Clay. “He’s with six eight-year-olds. Could you get him?”

“Sure.” Clay set the pizza down on a plate, grabbed a napkin, and headed toward the other room. “Be right back.”

Laura watched him walk away. She’d had mixed feelings about Eric’s younger brother since their days as classmates in grade school. Clay was kind and gentle, with blonde hair and a square forehead that made people wonder whether he and Eric were really brothers. Her feelings for the two men had always been as different as their looks. Laura had fallen for Eric the moment she’d met him. His confidence and ambition, the sure way he held himself. Clay had been her friend; Eric, her first love.

Her only love.

But since Clay’s return to Southern California, Laura had to wonder. Had she picked the wrong brother so many years ago? The thought was crazy, really, but still it lay there on the doormat of her heart. Laura watched Clay as he made his way through the arcade searching for Josh. Clay wasn’t the financial success that Eric was, and he didn’t have Eric’s striking looks. But what did those things matter, really? Clay could make her smile as easily as he could swing Josh up onto his shoulders. The man taught Sunday school at the church they all attended, he sang in the choir, and even though he’d been back just a short while, he’d already taken part in two workdays at the Los Angeles homeless mission.

Why couldn’t Eric be that way? And why couldn’t he be as attentive to Josh as Clay had been these past few months?

Laura let the thought pass. Maybe it was time she and Eric saw the counselor again.

It was something they'd done every few years for the past decade, and they were about due for another round. Nothing permanent ever came of their sessions. Laura would talk about how she felt distant, unloved, ignored; and Eric would explain that his job needed him if he were ever going to make something of himself. They'd hash it out with the counselor for ten or twelve weeks and make promises to change: Laura, that she'd be more understanding; and Eric, that he'd look for ways to spend time at home.

The changes never lasted more than a few months.

Clay was heading toward her again, Josh and his buddies in tow. Josh jogged ahead of the others, gave Laura a quick side hug, and stared at his cake. "Why didn't you tell us it was melting?"

"I didn't want to leave the—"

"Where's Dad?" Josh stared across the restaurant toward the front door and back at Laura. Disappointment settled in around the corners of his eyes. "He didn't come, did he?"

Clay stood with Josh's buddies a few feet away. His eyes met Laura's and she saw confusion there. The fact that Eric hadn't made it to Josh's birthday was a shock to Clay. Laura bit her lip and moved her gaze to Josh. "He'll be here, buddy. He's running late."

"I'm hungry!" One of Josh's friends wormed his way to the front of the pack. "That's my favorite cake."

"Okay, guys." Laura summoned a smile. "Take a seat and let's sing."

Clay anchored himself beside her while she led the boys in an upbeat off-key version of the birthday song. When they finished he nudged her elbow and leaned close enough so that only she could hear him. "I'm worried about Eric." He reached into her purse, pulled out her cell phone, and handed it to her. "I'll cut the cake. Go call him."

\*\*\*\*

Eric Michaels was surrounded by Koppel and Grant's top planners, four men and two women who collectively orchestrated multimillion-dollar

deals each day for high-stakes investors and major corporations around the world. The planners worked on commission, and each had already earned six-figure bonuses that year. The meeting was a brainstorming session about which pharmaceutical company's potential earnings most outweighed the risk of investment in the current market.

They were two hours late with no sign of reaching an agreement.

"My gut says go with Amgen." Paul Murphy stood and paced to the window. The sun was setting, and the sky over the San Fernando Valley was streaked in orange. "They're working on that Lou Gherig's cure, and insiders say they're developing a genetic response to a broad range of cancers. They're the ticket."

"If we're talking gut, I'd say Chiron's a better choice. Their numbers are up the past few weeks, and they've got a cancer cure on the table."

"Listen." Eric leaned back in his chair and tapped his pencil on his notepad. "Our clients don't pay us to go with our gut." A sharp sigh escaped him. "New York wants our decision first thing in the morning." He looked around the room. "We can't afford to be wrong."

"We've been right three out of the last four times." Murphy spun around and paced back to the table. He was a heavysset man, and the veins near his temple made distinct blue lines on either side of his forehead. "What do they want? We can't see into the future."

"With ten million dollars riding ..."—Eric met the eyes of the others—"we better learn how." He hesitated. "Allen says one more mistake, and they'll consider closing us."

"Close the LA office?" Murphy's mouth hung open. "Allen's crazy."

"Murphy's right." One of the two women at the table leaned forward, her brow pinched. "Investors won't work with a planner whose only office is in New York. West Coast players are too important."

"I know that, and so does Allen. But let's remember one thing." Eric stared at the ceiling for a moment. He loved this, loved the banter back and forth and the clients waiting breathlessly for their decision. The outcome of

this meeting would influence the way fortunes were made or lost. That kind of power was heady in a way that never lost its allure. He looked at his peers once more. "In this business everyone's replaceable."

From a small pocket inside his leather briefcase, Eric's cell phone rang. He stared at the bag and suddenly he remembered.

Josh's birthday.

It was today, wasn't it? Yes, September 4 ... that was the day. The boy was eight. Eric shot a look at the clock on the wall and grimaced. Seven-thirty. What time had he told Laura he'd be there? Six o'clock, or was it six-thirty? Either way he was late. The phone rang again, and Eric glanced around the room. All eyes were on him. He reached into the bag, grabbed his phone, stood and held up a single finger. "Be right back," he mouthed the words.

Then, with the phone still ringing in his hand, Eric moved quickly across the room and slipped into the hallway. In one motion he extended the antenna, flipped the phone open, and lifted it to his ear. "Hello?"

"Eric?"

"Laura?" The background sounds were so loud Eric could barely hear her. He braced himself for what was coming. "Are you at the restaurant?" There was a pause and Eric hesitated. Maybe she couldn't hear him. "Laura?"

"I'm here," she said, exhaling hard, disappointment in her tone. "Of course I'm at the restaurant. We've been here for two hours. The pizza's gone, the tokens are spent, and Clay's helping Josh cut his birthday cake."

"Clay?" Eric swallowed, desperate to buy some time. At least his brother had remembered, which meant Laura wasn't handling the party by herself. Still ... Eric was the boy's father, and they had just one child, after all. He pressed his thumb and forefinger into his temples. How could he have forgotten? "Is Clay helping you?"

"Yes." She paused long enough to make him nervous. "He likes being a part of Josh's life."

Eric wiped a thin layer of perspiration off his forehead and cursed under his breath. "I can be there in fifteen minutes."

Laura said nothing.

"Fifteen minutes, Laura. I mean it."

"What happened this time?" Sarcasm filled in the spaces between her words. "Did you forget?"

"Of course not." His answer was quick and sounded like a lie even to him. "We had a decision to make, an important meeting. I was in charge, Laura. I couldn't just walk out. New York needs our answer by tomorrow."

"Tell that to Josh."

"Look ..." He felt trapped and his heart rate doubled. His associates were only a few yards away behind the closed office door, so he kept his voice quiet. "We're wasting time. I'll be there in fifteen, Laura. I swear."

"No, Eric. Forget it."

"Why?" He made a weak attempt at sounding indignant. "You'll be another half hour. I could get there for the end of it, at least."

"You wouldn't."

"Fifteen minutes, Laura. I promise. I'll be there in—"

"Stop." Laura raised her voice and just as quickly dropped it again. "We both know you won't be here in fifteen minutes." Her voice broke and she hesitated. "I'll make something up for Josh, tell him it was out of your control."

"It is, Laura. That's not a lie."

"Spare me, please. Meetings can be rescheduled." She dropped the sarcasm, and a tired sadness filled her voice instead. "It's Josh's birthday."

Eric swallowed hard. He could hardly tell her the truth, that until her phone call he hadn't given the boy's birthday a single thought. "You're right." He steadied his tone. "I messed up. Tell Josh I'll make it up to him this weekend."

"With what?"

"With ..." His mind raced. "With a trip to the beach. Tell him I got

him something special, something we can only use out on the water.”

“The beach?” Laura sounded doubtful. “This weekend?”

“Or next at the latest.”

“You’ll be in New York this weekend.”

“Right, right.” He made a fist and pounded out a series of light staccatos against the doorframe. “Next weekend, then. Tell him it’ll be next weekend for sure.”

“Fine.” Laura’s tone told him everything her words didn’t say. She was tired of his excuses, his absence at home, the way his heavy work schedule left her a single parent so often. They were feelings that came up every now and then, feelings that sometimes sent them to a counselor for help. But no matter how crazy his work schedule became, no matter how often they made appointments with a counselor, the result was always the same.

Laura would understand.

She might not have been happy about it, but she would understand because ultimately she had to. His job was their single source of income, and it cost a lot to run a household like theirs. They could talk about family or faith coming first in their lives, but the truth was everything else revolved around his work schedule. And it would until he was named president of the company.

When that day came, he would make up for a lifetime of missed birthdays. Or at least that was the plan. And until then Laura would have no choice but to go along with it. The silence between them was too long to be anything but intentional. Eric rolled his eyes and focused on a vent in the hallway ceiling. “Laura?”

“What?” Her voice was quieter than before, defeated.

“I’m sorry.” He took a step back toward the meeting room. “Tell Josh for me.”

“Good-bye, Eric.”

“Hey ...” If he didn’t need to leave for Josh’s party, then they might as



well finish their discussion about Amgen and Chiron. It could take hours the way things were going. “Don't wait up for me.”

“What?” Her anger was quick and intense.

Eric held his breath and kept his voice low. “The meeting could last until after ten. If I finish up, I can go in late tomorrow and maybe have breakfast with you and Josh.” He gave her a chance to respond, but she said nothing. “Josh'll be in bed by the time I get home, anyway.”

“Fine. Good-bye.”

“That's okay, isn't it? Wouldn't it be better to get the meeting—”

There was a click at the other end, and after a few seconds, the phone went dead. Eric closed the phone and stared at it for a moment. Fine. Work was easier when she was mad at him. It gave him another reason to stay late at the office. He steadied himself, then returned to the meeting room. A discussion was under way about the reality of Chiron's discovery in the cancer field. Before Eric joined in, he slipped his phone back into his briefcase and pulled out his palm pilot. In the notes section, he jotted down, “Buy Josh a boogie board.”

Then he checked his weekend calendar. His flight to New York was first thing Saturday morning. That would give him Sunday breakfast and lunch to connect with Allen and a handful of execs from the New York office. Monday and Tuesday would be booked solid with meetings on the sixty-fourth floor of the World Trade Center.

One of the most powerful places on earth.

Ideally he could buy Josh the boogie board tonight. That way he could give it to him over breakfast. Where had he seen one recently? Eric stared at his palm pilot and tried to remember. Then it came to him. The Albertsons near the freeway. Every now and then the grocery stores carried beach supplies—even boogie boards. And last week Eric had stopped in for an orange juice, and there they were, stacked in a pyramid near the front of the store. Fortunately, the place was open until eleven on weeknights.

Eric snapped the pen into the side of his palm pilot and slipped it back

in his briefcase. Perfect. He would stop by the market on the way home, buy the boogie board, and surprise Josh the next morning. That ought to make up for missing the boy's birthday party. Besides, Clay was there. He'd help Laura get the presents to the car and make Josh feel special.

That was all that mattered.

Someone had shifted the conversation back to Amgen, and Eric listened for a moment before cutting in. "There're five other pharmaceuticals that need our consideration." He opened the portfolio on the table in front of him. "Let me read you some of their statistics ..."

The meeting wore on hour after hour and didn't wrap up until ten-thirty. Disclosures had been made by each planner at the table, and finally they agreed that Amgen was their best bet. Put the money on Amgen and you couldn't lose. They were right this time. Eric could sense it.

The moment they were finished, Murphy reached into his portable file and pulled out a single piece of paper. "I almost forgot. Allen wants us to divide up a list of new investors before we call tomorrow."

A series of collective groans sounded from the others. "We should've done that tonight." Eric folded his arms and frowned.

"It's too late." Murphy returned the paper to his file and closed it. "Let's meet for breakfast tomorrow at the café downstairs. Seven o'clock." He looked at the others. "Does that work?"

There were nods of agreement from around the room as people reached for their palm pilots and day planners and penciled in the morning meeting. The group dispersed and headed for their private offices where some of them would spend another hour working their computer files.

Eric walked to the parking lot with Trish O'Reilly, the newest member of the team. They were halfway to their cars when Trish slowed her steps and cast him a long look. "Who was on the phone?"

The question caught Eric off guard.

He made it a point not to get into his personal life at work. But something about the late hour and the relief of having wrapped up the

meeting made him feel like talking. Or maybe it was simply the fact that he wasn't looking forward to going home and facing Laura. He stared past the parking lot lights to the sky beyond. "My wife."

Trish stopped walking and crossed her arms. Her bag hung from one shoulder, and for the first time Eric noticed how young she was. Not more than twenty-seven, and not bad looking.

She narrowed her eyes and said, "How do you do it? Keep her happy with all the hours you put in here?"

"Well ..." Eric remembered Laura's tone from earlier. "It's not easy."

"I know." Trish let her gaze fall to the asphalt parking lot for a moment. When she looked up, a certain vulnerability filled her eyes. "My husband filed for divorce yesterday."

"Wow." Eric set his briefcase down and slipped his hands in his pocket. "I'm sorry."

A single tear fell onto Trish's cheek and she dabbed at it.

"Hey ... it's okay." Eric felt suddenly awkward. "You'll find someone else." Without knowing why exactly, he moved closer and hugged her. Not an intimate embrace, but the sort of loose hug people gave at funerals when they didn't know what to say.

Trish stayed in his arms for several seconds and then pulled away. "I'm sorry." She sniffed. "I didn't mean to lose it." Her eyes met his again. "I love working here, really I do. But sometimes I wonder how any of us can do both. You know, have the dream job and the perfect home life."

"It's all about sacrifice." Eric took a step backwards and reached for his briefcase again. "My wife likes the life we live, the house, the trips, the cars. She doesn't complain very often." He pictured Josh and his buddies enjoying themselves at the pizza parlor. "Sometimes I miss out on the family."

"Sounds like you have it figured out."

"Yeah." Doubt nibbled at the heels of Eric's conscience. "I guess."

Somewhere in the distant places of his mind, Eric wondered if Trish

was interested in him or merely looking for a friend in light of her personal troubles. Either way, he wasn't interested. He didn't have enough time for Laura and Josh, let alone a diversion like Trish. They talked for another few minutes, and then Eric nodded toward his car. "I better get going."

"Yeah." Trish gave him a sad smile. "Me too. See you tomorrow at breakfast."

"Tomorrow ..." Eric's voice trailed off. He'd promised Laura he'd go in late tomorrow and share breakfast with her and Josh. Now he'd have to leave earlier than usual. Why hadn't he thought of that when Murphy brought it up? He could have insisted they stay late tonight rather than meet so early in the morning. "Seven o'clock, was that it?"

"Yep." Trish took a few steps toward her car. "Hey, Eric. Thanks for listening."

"Sure." He moved toward his new model black Mercedes. "Anytime."

Five minutes later he was driving by Albertson's supermarket when he slammed on the brakes. The boogie board! He backed up, pulled into the parking, and sent a hurried look at the time on his dashboard. Two minutes after eleven. *Be open, come on, guys.* He sped into a spot near the front, slammed the gearshift into park, and raced up to the double doors. A teenager in a white smock was mopping the floor inside.

"Hey ..." Eric banged on the window until the teen looked at him. "Open up. Please! I have to buy something."

"Sorry." The boy shook his head. He stopped sweeping and moved a few steps toward the doors. "We're closed."

Eric banged again. "It's an emergency." No pimple-faced kid was going to tell him what he could and couldn't do. "Get your manager!"

The boy disappeared and returned in less than a minute with a short, frazzled man in a rumpled shirt and tie. The man came up to the doors and shouted at Eric. "The registers are closed for the night. We open at seven tomorrow morning."

Desperation surged through Eric. He couldn't come home empty-

handed. Not after missing Josh's birthday party. His hands shook as he reached into his pocket and grabbed his wallet. Fumbling with the flaps, he opened it, yanked out a hundred-dollar bill, and waved it at the manager. "It's an emergency. Please!"

The man eyed the bill and looked around. The teenager was gone, no doubt sweeping some other part of the store. In a sudden motion, the manager slipped a key in one of the doors and opened it just wide enough for Eric to slip through. "Look." He took the hundred dollars and gave Eric a frustrated shake of his head. "You have two minutes."

Eric glared at the man. Two minutes for a hundred bucks?

He took off into the store, mumbling under his breath. If he needed more time, he'd take it. He crossed the store and made his way toward the boogie board display. It took him thirty seconds to realize it had been taken down. "Hey!" He barked the word, and it echoed across the line of empty checkout stands.

The manager appeared, impatience working its way into the wrinkles around his mouth. "You ready?"

"Where're the boogie boards? You had a hundred last week."

"It was a promotion. Shipped the last of 'em back yesterday."

Eric gritted his teeth and glanced around the store. What else would a supermarket have for an eight-year-old boy? He moved quickly through the store and decided on a tall red birthday card and an oversized bar of chocolate. He paid the manager and was back in his car in two minutes.

One hundred and four dollars for a card and candy.

When he pulled in the garage a half hour later, the house was dark. He crept into the house and turned on the light over the stovetop. In the dim glow he grabbed a pen from the junk drawer and opened the birthday card.

*Dear Josh ... sorry I missed your party, but guess what? You get to help pick out your present the weekend after I get back from New York. A boogie board! Won't that be great? I'll teach you everything I know, and we'll have a great day. Happy birthday, son. Take care. Dad.*

He put the card into its envelope, sealed the flap, and wrote Josh's name across the front. Then he propped it up next to the candy bar in a place on the counter where Josh would see it the next morning.

Laura was already asleep, so Eric crashed in the guest room rather than wake her. He tossed and turned most of the night, wondering if they should have gone with Chiron over Amgen and whether the execs at either pharmaceutical actually had their hands on a cancer cure.

By six-thirty the next morning, he was back on the road headed for the breakfast meeting at work.

## **Twee**

4 September 2001

Laura Michaels swaai om en hardloop “kerplaks!” in ’n reuse muis vas. Haar gillettjie word deur die gejl van honderd baldadige kinders ingesluk. Sy tree terug, haar hande op die muis se harige arms. Sy kyk heen en weer om seker te maak nie een van die kinders kyk nie. Toe leun sy nader en fluister in ’n harde stem: “Is jy oukei?”

Die muis se groot plastiekkop beweeg op en af. Hy lig sy poot en wys na die smeltende roomyskoek op een van die tafels.

Laura trek haar asem in. “Die koek!” Sy kam met haar hande deur haar reguit blonde hare en kyk op haar horlosie. Seweuur. Eric moes al ’n uur gelede hier gewees het. Sy slaag daarin om te glimlag en korrel haar woorde na die mond van die reuse muis sodat die onbekende persoon binnekant haar kan hoor. “Ek gaan net gou die seuntjies roep; ek’s nou weer hier.”

Die muis knik weer en loop na een van die tafels toe.

Josh wou sy agtste verjaarsdag by Chuck E. Cheese’s vier, en Laura en Eric het geredelik ingestem. Laura sou ’n roomyskoek gaan oplaai en die restaurant sou vir die pizza en drinkgoed sorg. Josh en sy maats kan hulleself ure lank besighou, en sy sou nie hoef op te ruim nie.

“Ek behoort net na halfses daar te wees,” het Eric vroeër die middag belowe. “Niks later as sesuur nie.”

Dit het doenbaar geklink. Die restaurant is aan die westekant van die San Fernando Valley, net tien minute van Eric se kantoor in die hartjie van die Warner Center. Aanvanklik het die middag volgens plan verloop. Die ses jong gaste is deur hulle ouers by die Michaels-gesin se huis in Westlake Village afgelaai en is van daar af saam met haar na die pizzarestaurant toe, ’n halfuur se ry met die Venture-snelweg.

Maar halfses het sesuur geword en die seuns het hulle pizza sonder enige

teken van Eric geëet. Versadig en verkwik het die seuns na die speelarea toe verkas terwyl Laura kort-kort na die voordeur loer. Dis nou 'n uur later en in Eric se afwesigheid is daar niemand om haar te help om die seuns tussen die baie ander kinders te gaan opkommandeer nie. Nou staan sy wag oor 'n smeltende roomyskoek en oorskietpizza wat onstabiel op 'n stapel onoopgemaakte geskenke gepak is.

*Dis onaanvaarbaar ... Waar is hy?*

Dis eerder 'n retoriese vraag as 'n gebed, en Laura wag nie vir 'n antwoord nie. Sy bespied die vertrek vol wemelende kinders vir enige teken van die seuntjies. Vergeet van die koek en presente; dit sal niks oorkom as sy 'n paar minute weg is nie. Sy begin haastig na die arkade toe aanstap toe sy skielik 'n hand op haar skouer voel. Sy swaai om. "Dank Vader, jy's ..." Haar woorde droog op toe sy sien dat dit Eric se broer is.

"Waar's Eric?" Clay Michaels staan by die tafel en kyk na Laura. Hy het 'n paar maande gelede na Los Angeles toe teruggekom nadat hy by 'n polisiekollege in Missouri opleiding ontvang het. Hy is 'n toegewyde polisiebeampte en hy verafgod sy ouer broer.

"Jy het alles, Eric," het Clay 'n paar weke gelede vir hom gesê. Sy stem was lig, sonder erns. Maar sy bewondering vir Eric was duidelik. "Jy's 'n wonderlike man, 'n wonderlike pa. Die perfekte ou met 'n perfekte gesin."

Laura kon dit nie oor haar hart kry om hom reg te help nie. As hy lank genoeg naby hulle sou bly, sou Clay kort voor lank 'n duideliker beeld van sy broer kry. Geleenthede soos dié sal Eric se ware kleure na vore bring – dié van 'n korporatiewe presteerder wie se oë uitsluitlik op die bopunt van die leer gerig is.

Sy glimlag halfhartig. "Hy's ... hy's laat."

"Vir Josh se verjaarsdag?" Clay se wenkbroue lig 'n aks. "Waar is hy?"

*Waar hy altyd is*, dink Laura. "By die werk. Hy is tien teen een nou op pad."

"Waar's Josh?" Clay haal die bord met pizza van die stapel presente af en kry vir hom 'n sny. "Lyk nie asof die koek dit gaan maak nie."

Laura kyk na die skare kinders in die speelkamer. "Iewers daarbinne." Sy kyk weer na Clay. "Hy's saam met ses agtjariges. Kan jy hom gaan haal?"

"Sekerlik." Clay sit die pizza neer en gryp 'n servet. "Ek's nou terug."

Laura kyk hom agterna. Sy het nog altyd gemengde gevoelens oor Eric se jonger broer gehad. Sy en Clay was saam op skool, en hy is goehartig en saggeaard, met blonde hare en 'n breë voorkop wat mense laat wonder of hy en Eric regtig broers is. Haar gevoelens vir die twee mans was nog altyd so uiteenlopend soos hulle uiterlikes. Die oomblik toe Laura Eric ontmoet het, het sy vir hom geval. Sy selfvertroue en ambisie, sy selfversekerde houding. Clay was haar vriend; Eric, haar eerste liefde.

Haar enigste liefde.

Maar sedert Clay se terugkoms na Suid-Kalifornië het Laura begin wonder. Het sy destyds die verkeerde broer gekies? Dis 'n absurde gedagte, maar dit skuil hardnekkig in die hoekies van haar hart. Laura kyk hoe Clay sy weg

deur die speelkamer baan op soek na Josh. Clay is nie die finansiële sukses wat Eric is nie, en het ook nie sy opvallende aantreklikheid nie. Maar wat daarvan? Clay kan haar met dieselfde gemak laat glimlag as waarmee hy Josh op sy skouers tel. Die man is 'n Sondagskoolonderwyser by hulle kerk, hy sing in die koor en selfs al is hy maar pas terug, het hy reeds twee maal by die sentrum vir haweloses in Los Angeles gaan uithelp.

Waarom kan Eric nie so wees nie? En waarom kan hy nie soveel aandag aan Josh gee soos wat Clay die afgelope paar maande gedoen het nie?

Laura laat die gedagte daar. Dalk is dit tyd dat sy en Eric weer die berader gaan sien.

Dis iets wat hulle die afgelope dekade elke twee of drie jaar gedoen het, en dit is weer tyd. Hulle sessies het nog nooit tot iets permanents gelei nie. Laura sou vertel dat sy ongeliefd, geïgnoreer en ver van haar man af voel; en Eric sou verduidelik dat sy werk hom nodig het indien hy ooit iets van homself wou maak. Hulle sou dit vir tien of twaalf weke saam met die berader uitspook en belowe om veranderinge aan te bring: Laura, dat sy meer begrip sal hê; en Eric, dat hy maniere sal kry om meer by die huis te wees.

Die veranderinge het nooit langer as 'n paar maande geduur nie.

Clay is op pad terug met Josh en sy maats agterna. Josh draf vooruit, gee Laura 'n vinnige, skewe drukkie en kyk na die koek. “Hoekom het Mamma nie vir ons gesê hy smelt nie?”

“Ek wou nie alles hier ...”

“Waar's Pa?” Josh se oë flits na die voordeur en dan teleurgesteld terug na Laura. “Hy het nie gekom nie, nè?”

Clay en die res van die seuntjies staan 'n paar treë van hulle af. Sy merk die verwarring in haar swaer se oë toe dit hare ontmoet. Die feit dat Eric nie vir Josh se verjaarsdag opgedaag het nie, is 'n skok vir Clay. Laura byt op haar lip en kyk na Josh. “Hy sal nou hier wees, my skat. Hy is net 'n bietjie laat.”

“Ek's honger!” Een van Josh se maats vleg van agter af deur die ander seuntjies. “Ek's mal oor roomyskoek.”

“Nou goed, ouens.” Laura glimlag. “Kom sit, dan sing ons vir Josh.”

Clay kom sit langs haar terwyl sy die seuns in 'n valserige weergawe van “Veels geluk, liewe maatjie” voorgaan. Toe hulle klaar is, pomp hy haar in die ribbes en praat naby haar oor: “Ek's bekommerd oor Eric.” Hy grawe in haar handsak, haal haar selfoon uit en gee dit vir haar. “Ek sal die koek sny. Gaan bel hom.”

Eric Michaels sit om 'n tafel saam met Koppel & Grant se topbeplanners, vier mans en twee vroue wat elke dag multimiljoendollar-transaksies vir hoë-opbrengsbeleggers en die grootste maatskappye wêreldwyd hanteer. Die beplanners werk op kommissie, en elkeen van hulle het hierdie jaar al sessyferbonusse verdien. Die vergadering is 'n dinkskrumsessie oor watter farmaseutiese maatskappy se potensiele verdienste die kleinste beleggingsrisiko in die huidige mark inhou.

Hulle is twee ure laat en nog geensins nader aan eenstemmigheid nie.



“My gevoel sê vir my dat ons saam met Amgen moet gaan.” Paul Murphy staan op en loop na die venster toe. Die son sit laag bo die horison, en bokant die San Fernando Valley is die hemel in oranje gebaai. “Hulle werk nog aan ’n middel teen Lou Gehrig en mense in die binnekring sê hulle is besig om ’n genetiese middel vir ’n groot verskeidenheid kankers te ontwikkel. Ek stem vir hulle.”

“As ons oor gevoelens praat, sê ek dat Chiron ’n beter keuse is. Hulle syfers het die laaste paar weke skerp gestyg en hulle het reeds ’n middel teen kanker op die tafel.”

“Luister.” Eric leun terug en tik met sy potlood op sy aantekeningboek. “Ons kliënte betaal ons nie om op gevoel te gaan nie.” ’n Ongeduldige sug ontsnap oor sy lippe. “New York wil môreoggend ons besluit hê.” Hy kyk na die ander. “Ons kan nie bekostig om verkeerd te wees nie.”

“Ons was die afgelope drie uit vier kere reg.” Murphy swaai om en kom sit weer by die tafel. Hy is ’n swaargeboude man en sy are vorm opmerkbare blou lyne aan weerskante van sy voorkop. “Wat wil hulle hê? Ons kan nie in die toekoms sien nie.”

“Met tienmiljoen dollar op die spel,” Eric ontmoet die ander se oë, “sal ons moet leer sien.” Hy aarsel. “Allen sê nog een fout, dan oorweeg hulle dit om ons te sluit.”

“Die LA-kantoor?” Murphy se mond hang oop. “Allen is mal.”

“Murphy is reg.” Een van die twee vroue by die tafel leun vooroor en frons. “Beleggers sal nie saam met ’n beplanner werk wie se enigste kantoor in New York is nie. Die Weskus-spelers is te belangrik.”

“Ek weet dit, en Allen ook. Maar ons moet een ding onthou.” Eric kyk vir ’n oomblik na die plafon. Hy is dol hieroor, oor die oor-en-weer-gekorswel en kliënte wat angstig op hulle besluit wag. Die uitkoms van hierdie soort vergaderings beslis of fortune gemaak of verloor word. Hierdie soort mag kom vir Eric saam met ’n soort euforie wat nooit sy bekoring verloor nie. Hy kyk weer na sy kollegas. “In hierdie besigheid is niemand onvervangbaar nie.”

Eric raak bewus van sy selfoon wat in ’n klein vakkie in sy leeraktetas lui. Hy kyk na die tas en skielik onthou hy.

Josh se verjaarsdag.

Dis vandag, nie waar nie? Ja, 4 September ... dis vandag. Die seun is agt. Eric se oë flits na die muurhorlosie en hy gryns. Halfagt. Hoe laat het hy vir Laura gesê sou hy daar wees? Seseur, of was dit halfsewe? Hoe dit ook al sy, hy is laat. Die foon lui weer en Eric kyk om hom rond. Almal se oë is op hom. Hy haal sy foon uit die aktetas, staan op en hou ’n vinger in die lug. “Nou weer terug,” vorm hy die woorde met sy mond.

Eric loop haastig na die deur toe en verdwyn in die gang. In een beweging trek hy die antenna uit, klap die foon oop en druk dit teen sy oor. “Hallo?”

“Eric?”

“Laura?” In die agtergrond raas dit só dat Eric haar skaars kan hoor. Hy staal

hom vir dit wat gaan kom. “Is jy by die restaurant?” Daar is ’n stilte en Eric aarsel. Dalk kan sy hom nie hoor nie. “Laura?”

“Ek’s hier,” sê sy en sug, haar stem swaar van teleurstelling. “Natuurlik is ek by die restaurant. Ons is al twee ure lank hier. Die pizza is op, die kinders het al die munte klaar gespeel en Clay help Josh om die verjaarsdagkoek te sny.”

“Clay?” Eric sluk en probeer tyd wen. Ten minste het sy broer onthou, wat beteken dat Laura die partytjie nie op haar eie hoef te hanteer nie. Nietemin ... Eric is die seun se pa en hulle het per slot van rekening net die een kind. Hy druk sy slape tussen sy duim en middelvinger vas. Hoe kon hy vergeet het?

“Jy sê Clay is daar om te help?”

“Ja.” Haar stilte maak hom senuweeagtig. “Hy hou daarvan om deel van Josh se lewe te wees.”

Eric vee die ligte sweet van sy voorkop af en vloek binnensmonds. “Ek kan oor ’n kwartier daar wees.”

Laura sê niks nie.

“’n Kwartier, Laura. Ek bedoel dit.”

“Wat is dit hierdie keer?” Haar woorde drup van sarkasme. “Het jy vergeet?”

“Natuurlik nie,” antwoord hy so vinnig dat dit selfs vir hom soos ’n leuen klink. “Ek sit in ’n dringende vergadering oor ’n belangrike besluit. Ek lei dit, Laura. Ek kon nie net uitloop nie. New York wil teen môre ’n antwoord hê.”

“Sê dit vir Josh.”

“Kyk ... ” Hy voel vasgekeer en sy hartklop versnel. Sy vennote sit aan die ander kant van die kantoordeur; dus praat hy sag. “Ons is besig om tyd te mors. Ek sal oor ’n kwartier daar wees, Laura. Ek sweer.”

“Nee, Eric. Los dit.”

“Hoekom?” Hy probeer verontwaardig klink. “Julle sal nog ’n halfuur wees. Ek sal ten minste voor die einde daar wees.”

“Jy sal nie.”

“Vyftien minute, Laura. Ek belowe. Ek sal oor ... ”

“Hou op.” Laura se stem styg voordat sy weer sagter praat. “Ons al twee weet jy gaan nie oor ’n kwartier hier wees nie.” Haar stem breek en sy aarsel. “Ek sal iets opmaak vir Josh, vir hom sê dat dit buite jou beheer was.”

“Dit was, Laura. Dis nie ’n leuen nie.”

“Spaar my dit. Vergaderings kan herskeduleer word.” Sy laat vaar die sarkasme en haar stem klink moeg en hartseer. “Dis Josh se verjaarsdag.”

Eric sluk swaar. Hy durf nie die waarheid praat en vir haar sê dat hy tot en met haar oproep nie vir ’n oomblik aan sy kind se verjaarsdag gedink het nie.

“Jy’s reg.” Hy vervolg in ’n gelykmatige stem. “Ek het drooggemaak. Sê vir Josh ons sal die naweek iets doen.”

“Soos wat?”

“Soos ... ” Hy probeer dink. “Strand toe gaan. Sê vir hom ek het iets spesiaals vir hom gekoop, iets wat ’n mens net op die water kan gebruik.”

“Die strand?” Laura klink onseker. “Hierdie naweek?”

“Of volgende naweek op die laatste.”

“Jy gaan hierdie naweek in New York wees.”

“O ja, natuurlik.” Hy maak ’n vuus waarmee hy ’n reeks ligte staccato’s teen die deurkosyn uitklop. “Volgende naweek, dan. Belowe hom ons sal dit volgende naweek doen.”

“Goed.” Laura se stem vertel hom alles wat sy nie met woorde sê nie. Sy is moeg vir sy verskonings, sy afwesigheid by die huis en sy werkprogram wat so dikwels van haar ’n enkelma maak. Hierdie gevoelens wat elke dan en wan na die oppervlak kom, is die rede dat hulle soms ’n berader gaan sien. Maar ongeag hoe dol dit by sy werk gaan en hoe gereeld hulle by die berader uitkom, die resultaat bly dieselfde.

Laura sal verstaan.

Sy is dalk nie gelukkig daaroor nie, maar op die ou einde sal sy verstaan omdat sy nie ’n keuse het nie. Sy werk is hulle enigste inkomste, en dit kos baie om ’n leefwyse soos hulle s’n vol te hou. Hulle stem saam dat dinge soos gesin en geloof eerste moet kom, maar feit is, die grootste deel van hulle lewe draai om sy werkprogram. En tot hy aangestel word as hoof van die maatskappy, sal dit so bly.

Wanneer dit gebeur, sal hy vir ’n leeftyd se vergete verjaarsdae vergoed. Dis sy plan, altans. Tot tyd en wyl moet Laura haar daarby berus en saamwerk. Daar is ’n gelade stilte oor die telefoon. Eric rol sy oë en fokus op ’n ventilasiegat in die gangplafon. “Laura?”

“Wat?” Haar stem klink verslae.

“Ek’s jammer.” Hy gee ’n tree na die konferensiesaal. “Sê asseblief vir Josh.”

“Totsiens, Eric.”

“Hei ... ” As hy nie meer vir Josh se partytjie hoef te jaag nie, kan hulle netsowel hulle gesprek oor Amgen en Chiron klaarmaak. “Moenie vir my wag nie.”

“Wat?” Haar woede is intens.

Eric hou sy asem op en vervolg in ’n lae stem. “Die vergadering kan tot ná tien aanhou. As ons vanaand kan klaarmaak, kan ek môre laat inkom en dalk eers saam met jou en Josh ontbyt eet.” Hy gee haar kans om te reageer, maar sy sê niks nie. “Josh sal in elk geval klaar in die bed wees wanneer ek by die huis kom.”

“Goed. Totsiens.”

“Dit maak tog meer sin. Sal dit nie beter wees om die vergadering ... ”

Daar is ’n klik aan die ander kant en ná ’n paar sekondes is die selfoon dood. Eric maak die foon toe en kyk vir ’n oomblik daarna. Nou ja. Dis makliker om te werk as sy vir hom kwaad is. Dit gee hom nog ’n rede om laat op kantoor te bly. Hy kry ’n houvas op homself en keer terug na die vergadering. Sy kollegas is besig om die lewensvatbaarheid van Chiron se ontdekking op mediese gebied te bespreek. Voordat Eric aan die gesprek begin deelneem, bêre hy sy foon en haal sy handrekenaar uit. Hy maak ’n venstertjie oop en tik: “Koop lyfplank vir Josh.”

Dan kyk hy na sy kalender. Hy vlieg vroeg Saterdagoggend New York toe.

Sodoende kan hy en Allen 'n paar van die raadslede Sondag vir ontbyt en middagete sien. Sy Maandag en Dinsdag is tjok-en-blok vol vergaderings op die vier-en-sestigste vloer van die World Trade Center.

Een van die grootste magsetels ter wêreld.

Dit sou ideaal wees as hy sommer vanaand Josh se lyfplank kan gaan koop. Dan kan hy dit môreoggend tydens ontbyt vir hom gee. Waar het hy onlangs een gesien? Eric staar na sy handrekenaar en probeer onthou. Toe weet hy. Die supermark naby die snelweg. Elke nou en dan hou die supermark strandbenodigdhede aan – selfs lyfplanke. En toe Eric verlede week 'n lemoensap daar gaan koop het, was daar 'n klomp van die planke in 'n piramide voor in die winkel gepak. Gelukkig maak die plek weeksaande eers elfuur toe.

Eric druk die pen aan die kant van sy handrekenaar in en bêre dit in sy aktetas. Mooi. Hy sal op pad huis toe by die winkel inspring, die lyfplank koop en Josh môreoggend verras. Dit behoort te vergoed vir sy afwesigheid by die partytjie. Clay is in elk geval daar. Hy sal Laura help om die geskenke in die motor te laai, en Josh spesiaal laat voel.

Dis al wat saak maak.

Iemand het die gesprek weer na Amgen gestuur, en Eric luister vir 'n oomblik voordat hy hulle onderbreek. “Daar is vyf ander maatskappye wat oorweeg moet word.” Hy maak die portefeulje op die tafel voor hom oop. “Kom ek lees vir julle 'n paar van hulle statistieke ...”

Die vergadering draal voort en dis halfelf toe hulle afsluit. Elke beplanner het voorleggings gemaak, en hulle het uiteindelik saamgestem dat Amgen hulle beste opsie is. Met hulle geld op Amgen kan hulle nie verloor nie. Hierdie keer is hulle reg. Eric kan dit aanvoel.

Die oomblik toe hulle klaar is, maak Murphy sy lêer oop en haal 'n papier uit. “Ek het amper vergeet. Allen wil hê ons moet 'n lys met nuwe beleggers opstel voordat ons môre bel.”

'n Gesamentlike kreun kom van die ander. “Ons moes dit vanaand gedoen het.” Eric vou sy arms en frons.

“Dis te laat.” Murphy bêre die papier in sy lêer en maak dit toe. “Kom ons kry mekaar môre vir ontbyt in die kafeteria. Seweur.” Hy kyk na die ander. “Is dit reg met julle?”

Daar is instemmende knikke terwyl die groep hulle handrekenaars en dagboeke uithaal en die vergadering aanteken. Daarna verdaag hulle na hulle eie kantore waar sommiges nog 'n uur of wat voor die rekenaar wil deurbring. Eric en Trish O'Reilly, hulle nuutste spanlid, loop saam na die parkeerterrein toe. Hulle is halfpad toe Trish skielik stadiger loop en langsaam na hom kyk. “Wie het gebel?”

Die vraag vang Eric onkant.

Hy maak 'n punt daarvan om nie sy persoonlike lewe by die werk te bespreek nie. Maar hy is skielik lus vir gesels, dalk omdat dit laat is en die vergadering suksesvol afgesluit is. Of dalk is dit eenvoudig die feit dat hy daarna opsien

om huis toe te gaan en Laura in die oë te kyk. Hy kyk verby die ligte in die parkeerterrein. “My vrou.”

Trish steek vas en vou haar arms. Haar handsak hang oor haar een skouer en vir die eerste keer sien Eric hoe jonk sy is. Sy kan nie ouer as sewe-en-twintig wees nie, en sy is mooi.

Sy vernou haar oë en sê: “Hoe doen jy dit? Hoe kry jy dit reg om haar gelukkig te hou as jy sulke lang ure werk?”

“Wel ...” Eric dink aan Laura se stemtoon van ’n ruk gelede. “Dis nie maklik nie.”

“Ek weet.” Trish laat sak haar blik vir ’n oomblik na die teerplaveisel. Toe sy opkyk, is daar ’n weerloosheid in haar oë. “My man het my gister gedagvaar vir ’n egskeiding.”

“Sjoe.” Eric sit sy aktetas neer en steek sy hande in sy sakke. “Ek’s jammer.” ’n Traan loop oor Trish se wang en sy vee dit af.

“Toemaar ... dis oukei.” Eric voel skielik ongemaklik. “Jy sal iemand anders kry.” Sonder dat hy mooi weet waarom, staan hy nader en gee haar ’n drukkie. Dis niks intiem nie, eerder die soort losserige drukkie wat mense mekaar by begrafnisse gee wanneer hulle nie weet wat om te sê nie.

Trish staan ’n paar oomblikke lank in sy arms voordat sy terugstaan. “Ek’s jammer.” Sy snuif. “Ek wou nie tranerig raak nie.” Haar oë ontmoet syne. “Ek is mal oor my werk hier. Maar soms wonder ek of ’n mens albei kan doen. Of dit enigsins moontlik is om ’n droomwerk en ’n volmaakte gesinslewe te hê.”

“Dit gaan oor opofferings.” Eric staan terug en tel sy tas op. “My vrou geniet ons manier van lewe, die huis, die vakansies, die motors. Sy kla nie dikwels nie.” Hy dink aan Josh en sy maats by die pizzeria. “Soms moet ek van ons gesinstyd inboet.”

“Dit klink of jy alles onder beheer het.”

“Mmmm.” Die onsekerheid knaag aan Eric se gewete. “Ek probeer my bes.” Iewers in sy agterkop wonder Eric of Trish in hom belangstel en of sy net iemand soek met wie sy oor haar probleme kan praat. Hoe dit ook al sy, hy stel nie belang nie. Hy het nie genoeg tyd vir Laura en Josh nie, laat staan nog vir ’n afleiding soos Trish. Nadat hulle nog ’n paar minute gesels het, knik Eric na sy motor. “Ek moet by die huis kom.”

“Ek ook.” Trish gee hom ’n hartseer glimlaggie. “Sien jou môre by die ontbyt.”

“Môre ...” Eric se stem sterf weg. Hy het Laura belowe dat hy môreoggend eers saam met haar en Josh sal ontbyt eet. Nou sal hy vroeër as gewoonlik moet ry. Waarom het hy nie daaraan gedink toe Murphy die ontbyt voorgestel het nie? Hy kon daarop aangedring het dat hulle vanaand klaarmaak in plaas daarvan om so vroeg môreoggend weer vergadering te hou. “Dis seweur, nè?”

“Jip.” Trish het al na haar motor begin loop, maar steek vas en draai om. “Eric, dankie dat jy geluister het.”

“Natuurlik.” Hy loop na sy nuwe swart Mercedes toe. “Enige tyd.”

Vyf minute later moet hy inderhaas rem trap toe hy al amper verby die supermark is. Die lyfplank! Hy ry agteruit, draai by die parkeerterrein in en kyk vinnig na die tyd op die paneelbord. Twee minute oor elf. *Wees oop, kom nou.* Hy parkeer reg voor die dubbeldeure. Binnekant is 'n tiener met 'n wit voorskoot besig om die vloer te mop.

“Haai ... ” Eric klop teen die venster totdat die tiener na hom kyk. “Kan ek inkom? Ek moet iets kry.”

“Jammer.” Die seun skud sy kop en loop nader. “Ons is toe.”

Eric klop harder. “Dis 'n noodgeval.” Oor sy dooie liggaam sal 'n puisiegesig-kind vir hom sê wat hy kan en nie kan doen nie. “Gaan roep jou bestuurder.”

Die seun verdwyn en kom binne 'n paar sekondes met 'n kort, uitgewaste mannetjie in 'n verkreukelde hemp en das teruggeloop. Die man loop tot by die deure en sê ongeduldig: “Die kasregisters is reeds gesluit. Ons maak môreoggend seweur oop.”

Nou is Eric desperaat. Hy kan nie met leë hande by die huis aankom nie. Nie nadat hy Josh se partytjie gemis het nie. Sy hande bewe toe hy sy beursie uit sy sak haal en daarin grawe. Hy pluk 'n honderddollarnoot uit en wys dit vir die man. “Dit is 'n noodgeval. Asseblief!”

Die man sien die noot en kyk dan om hom rond. Die tiener is weg om iewers anders te gaan skoonmaak. Toe druk die bestuurder haastig 'n sleutel in die deur en maak dit net groot genoeg oop sodat Eric kan inkom. “Kyk.” Hy neem die geld en knik gefrustreerd vir Eric. “Jy het twee minute.”

Eric gee die man 'n vuil kyk. Twee minute vir 'n honderd dollar?

Hy swets binnensmonds toe hy die winkelgange invaar. Hy sal hom deur niemand laat aanjaag nie. Hy loop haastig deur die winkel na waar die lyfplanke uitgestal was. Dit neem hom dertig sekondes om te besef dat die piramide weg is. “Haai!” Sy stem is skerp en eggo deur die leë gange.

Die bestuurder verskyn, 'n ongeduldige trek om sy mond. “Is jy klaar?”

“Waar is die lyfplanke? Julle het laas week nog honderde van die goed gehad.”

“Dit was 'n promosie. Die laastes is gister teruggestuur.”

Eric byt op sy tande en kyk om hom rond. Wat sal 'n supermark nog vir 'n agtjarige seuntjie hê? Hy loop vinnig deur die winkel en besluit op 'n groot rooi verjaarsdagkaartjie en 'n ekstragroot sjokolade. Hy betaal die bestuurder en is twee minute later weer in sy motor.

Eenhonderd-en-vier dollar vir 'n kaartjie en sjokolade.

Die huis is donker toe hy 'n halfuur later in die garage parkeer. Hy sluip by die kombuisdeur in en skakel die lig bokant die stoof aan. In die dowwe skynsel kry hy 'n pen in een van die laaie en maak die verjaarsdagkaartjie oop.

*Liewe Josh ... jammer ek kon nie by jou partytjie wees nie, maar raai wat? Wanneer ek van New York af kom, neem ek jou volgende Saterdag sodat jy kan help om vir jou 'n present te kies. 'n Lyfplank! Hoe klink dit? Ek gaan jou alles leer wat ek weet, en ons gaan 'n wonderlike dag hê. Veels geluk, my*

*seun. Mooi bly. Pa.*

Nadat hy die kaartjie in die koevert gesit en toegeplak het, skryf hy Josh se naam op. Toe maak hy dit langs die sjokolade op die toonbank staan waar Josh dit môreoggend sal sien.

Laura het reeds gaan slaap, en omdat Eric haar nie wil pla nie, gaan klim hy in die gastekamer se bed. Hy slaap amper niks nie en wonder heelnag of Chiron nie 'n beter opsie sou wees nie en of enige van die farmaseutiese maatskappye wel met 'n middel teen kanker vorendag gaan kom.

Teen halfsewe die volgende oggend is hy reeds in sy motor op pad na die sakeontbyt.

# Chapter THREE

SEPTEMBER 7, 2001

The jet ski was flying fifty miles an hour over the harbor.

Beneath another unseasonably warm, clear blue September morning, Jake felt his wife bury her face against his back. He loved how her body felt as it came against him, loved the way it made him feel bigger than her, stronger. Like she needed him—if only for a few minutes on the open water.

It was September 7, the day they'd looked forward to all week.

Once a month he had a Friday off, and as long as the weather allowed, they would end up just off South Beach down at the water. Most years saw them putting the jet ski away by now. But not this September. It had been the most beautiful fall Jake could ever remember.

This time Sue and Larry Henning had come with them, and the two couples were taking turns watching the kids splash along the shoreline. Sierra's best playmate was the Hennings' daughter, Katy. The girls were both four, both a year away from kindergarten. Larry and Sue also had a six-month-old, but he was spending the day with his grandparents.

Good ol' Larry. The man had been Jake's best friend since high school. They went through fire science together and joined the fire department the same month. It took a few years to wind up at the same station, but for the past six years, they'd both worked in downtown Manhattan, Engine 57.

Larry's knees weren't what they once were. Too many years of football—both in high school and for the FDNY team. But he never missed a chance to hit the water with Jake.

“Flying across the water for an hour,” Larry often said, “is worth a week of icing my knees.”

Jake turned the jet ski in a gradual arch, and he felt Jamie lay her head



to the side, letting the chilly water spray her face. He knew what she was thinking because she'd told him a hundred times. She loved being out on the water with him, loved the speed and the feeling of their bodies working together with the machine.

She leaned up close to his ear. "My turn."

He nodded, cut the engine, and spun in a tight circle. With grace and ease he swung his body around hers and took the backseat. At the same time she slid forward into the driver's seat, and he gave her ribs a playful poke. "Hey ... don't kill us."

"Come on, ya big chicken." Jamie laughed and shot him a glance over her left shoulder. "A little speed never hurt anyone."

Jake loved the teasing in her voice, the way her eyes danced. He brought his hands up and covered his eyes. "Tell me when I can look."

She let her head fall back as she kicked the engine into high gear. At work Jake had the more dangerous job. Jamie was a stay-at-home mom, after all. The most dangerous thing she did was cook dinner.

But when it came time to play, Jamie's thrill seeking knew no limits.

Jake perched his chin on her shoulder and watched her spot a cruiser a hundred yards out. "Hold on!" Jamie's voice faded in the roar of the engine as she opened the throttle and headed toward the boat's considerable wake. Jake peered over her shoulder and watched the speedometer climb past fifty ... fifty-five ... fifty-eight ...

The move had Jamie's signature all over it. Here she was—terrified deep down in some private cellar of her heart that he would get hurt fighting fires—but more than willing to risk both their lives on a simple day of fun. He let his hands fall to Jamie's narrow waist. Her wild streak had always been there, even back when they were kids.

The other football players wouldn't have considered dating Jamie Steel. "She's a beauty, don't get me wrong," Larry had told Jake the fall of their sophomore year. "But the girl would make a better safety than half the guys on the team. If I made her mad, she'd kick my behind."

Back then, Larry had probably been right.

Jamie had been point guard on the basketball team, catcher for the softball squad, and a state champion in the javelin throw. The school records she set back in the late eighties stood to this day, as far as Jake knew.

After high school, when their dating grew more serious, Jake would take her for walks around Wolfe's Pond Park. Always after a few minutes the same stretch of dirt road lay out before them, and Jamie would tap him on the shoulder. "Race ya." And with that she'd be off, sprinting with everything in her to the end of the road.

It always took Jake a few seconds to kick into gear, but a number of times, Jamie actually beat him. Fair and square. After the race they would walk to a nearby tree and fall onto the ground beneath it, gasping for breath. Once when they lay there that way, Jake studied her and shook his head. "What're you runnin' from, Jamie?"

She rolled onto her stomach and played with a piece of grass. "You."

He remembered shaking his head, assuming she didn't understand the question. "Not the race, silly. In life. Why do you push so hard all the time? You must be running from something."

For a long time, she looked at him, her eyes deeper than the New York Harbor. "I told you, goofy."

"Me?" He cocked his head. "You're running from me?"

"Yep." She planted her elbows in the soft ground and rested her chin in her hands. "I have all this ... I don't know, this stuff in my heart. Feelings and emotions ... an energy, almost. Way more than I should have." She gave him a lopsided grin. "The more I use up on sports, the less I have for you."

He'd leaned against the tree that afternoon and felt himself falling in love with her. "Is that right?"

"Yes." Her eyes sparkled in the midday sun. "That way if anything ever happens to you, I won't lose myself."

There were times after that—in the first year of their marriage—when Jake tried to remind her of that conversation. But she pretended not to remember. “You hold back with me, Jamie. How come?”

“I do not.” She'd look surprised, hurt even. “Everything I have to give is yours, Jake. You know that.”

He would study her, trying to understand her. “Remember that day at Wolfe's Pond? You told me you couldn't give me everything in case something happened to me. Because you didn't want to lose yourself, remember? Like you were afraid to love me too much.”

She would toss her dark hair and shake her head. “I'm competitive, maybe. And I worry about your job. But I'm not afraid to love you, Jake.” She would frame his face with her fingertips and speak straight to his soul. “I'm not holding back, honey. Not with you. Not ever.”

But she did. She still did.

It was obvious, if only at times like this, when she was blazing across the harbor with her hair on fire, frantic to outrun some unseen terror, something she was terrified would catch her if she didn't run. Jake held on to her so he wouldn't fall off the back.

If she wasn't running from him, maybe she was running from God. Jake was practically desperate for God to get her attention somehow. He prayed about it every day, but still Jamie hadn't shown any interest.

Whatever it was, Jamie was running from it. Jake was convinced.

They reached the cruiser and headed straight for its wake.

“Hold on,” she yelled.

They hit the wave full bore, and both of them lifted with the jet ski to catch two seconds of air before smacking down against the water and hitting the second wave. This time they nearly wiped out.

“Slow down, Jamie.” He gave her shoulders a gentle squeeze. “Don't be crazy.”

She eased up on the speed and did a wide turn. “What time do we need to be back?”

Jake looked at his watch. "Five minutes."

"No problem." She took aim for the cruiser's wake once more and hit the throttle, sailing out of it in a perfect angle toward the shore. "I'll get us there in three."

Jamie lowered her head and gave it as much gas as she could, shooting them across the harbor at unbelievable speeds. Jake wasn't worried. They both could swim, and Jamie was too keen a driver to let anything bad happen on the open water. But as he leaned against her, savoring her naked back against his chest, he knew he would never quite connect with her the way he wanted to, the way she was capable of connecting.

Not as long as she was running.

He gazed out at the city skyline and the wispy clouds beyond. *God, if she's running from You, please ... catch her. She's so afraid ... afraid of loss and change and death. Afraid of You. I don't know what else to do, God. Help her stop running ... Whatever it takes.*

A seagull swooped low a few feet from them as Jamie cut the engine and eased the jet ski up onto the shore. Sierra and Katy came running, their knees and ankles covered in sand.

Jake kissed the back of Jamie's neck. "Nice ride."

"Thanks." Jamie was breathless, her cheeks red. "I could've gone on that way forever."

Jake smiled, but her words left a pit in his stomach. Whatever she was running from, it still plagued her, just as it always had. They parked the jet ski and headed toward Larry and Sue, and the whole time Jake wondered about his wife. Would she run this way forever? Or would she be brave enough to slow down one of these days and let him catch her?

Not just him, but God as well.

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Jamie and Sue stayed with the girls so the men could have a run on the water together. The women moved their beach chairs closer to the

shore, and within earshot of Sierra and Katy.

"I swear Katy's grown two inches since the last time we did this." Jamie shielded her eyes so she could see the little girls in front of them.

"She's taking after my side of the family." Sue reached for a can of Diet Coke. "My mother's nearly six foot."

"Lucky girl. She'll be first picked on the basketball team." Jamie leaned back. "Not like us shrimps who had to work for every minute on the court."

They were quiet then, and Sue stared out at the water after their husbands. "I love seeing them together out there." She shifted her gaze to Jamie. "They're so much alike. Brothers almost."

Jamie reached for a bottle of sunscreen, poured the warm white liquid into her palms, and worked it along her forearms. It felt hot and wonderful against her skin, erasing the deep cold from the ride across the harbor. "I like them working the same shifts." She glanced at Sue. "They look out for each other."

"Larry says Jake would never let anything happen to him on the job." Sue chuckled. "Like Jake's somehow bigger than life."

"Jake feels the same way about Larry." Jamie set the sunscreen down in the sand. "They're quite a team."

"Like twins, separated at birth." Sue cast an easy grin toward the spot where the men were picking up speed and heading out for deeper water. "Even if they look nothing alike."

Jamie took hold of the armrests and stared out at the horizon. Sue was right. The men looked like polar opposites. Jake six-two, lean and built with short dark hair and blue eyes. Larry moved like a tank, two hundred pounds of muscle on a frame that was barely five-nine in his work boots. His skin was covered with the kind of freckles that usually accompany his shade of red hair.

Jamie shook her head. "You should've seen them in high school. Mo and Curley all over again."

“I bet.”

“Larry, the wild one ... sensible Jake, the voice of reason.” Jamie dug around in the bag beside her, found a white visor, and slid it onto her head. A breeze washed over her, and she breathed in the ocean air. “You can’t believe the crazy things they did back then.”

“Like what?”

Jamie closed her eyes for a moment and grabbed at one of a hundred memories. “Like the time Larry convinced the football team to run lines down here at the beach at midnight.”

“Midnight?”

“Yes.” Jamie raised an eyebrow. “In winter.” She chuckled at the memory. “The guys had icicles hanging from their hair before Jake rounded everyone up and told them to meet back at the school.”

“Hmmm.” Sue looked back out to sea, and Jamie followed her gaze. The men were just a dot on the distant horizon. “I wish I could’ve been there.”

“It seems like you were around back then.” From a few yards away, Sierra waved, and Jamie waved back. “You met Larry in college, right?”

“Our junior year. Third meeting of the campus Bible study.”

Something about the words soured Jamie’s mood, and she fell silent for several minutes. Usually, she let it pass when Larry or Sue or even Jake brought up anything religious. But here, now, she felt suddenly compelled to ask. She turned to her friend and cocked her head. “Is it really that wonderful?”

Sue’s face went blank. “What?”

“Church ... Bible studies ... you know, the God stuff.” Jamie’s words were slow, thoughtful. “It’s kept your attention all these years, but why? What’s so great about it?”

“Uh-oh.” She wrinkled her nose. “Jake’s pushing you?”

“No.” Jamie laughed even as the tension built within her. “He hasn’t done that for years. He knows better.” Her tone grew serious again. “I just

wonder, I guess. Why bother? I mean we have so little time together as it is. Why spend Sunday mornings in some old building singing songs?"

Peace washed over Sue's face, and she took a sip from her pop. "It isn't about the building or the songs." There wasn't a trace of criticism in Sue's voice. "It's about coming together and declaring as a group that you believe ... that you desperately need a Savior and that the week wouldn't be the same without taking time to say so."

Doubt blew across the barren places of Jamie's heart. "You actually want to be there?"

"Yes." Sue's expression was sympathetic. "You should give it a try someday, Jamie. One Sunday wouldn't hurt."

Jamie bristled at the idea. "If I believed in God, I'd go."

"Oh." Sue waited a minute before responding. "You still don't believe?" She motioned toward the girls. They had built a sandcastle and were digging a moat around it. "Even after having Sierra?"

"Meaning what?" Jamie didn't see the connection.

"Kids. The miracle of life." Sue shrugged. "If anything convinced me God was real, it was holding Katy for the first time. There she was, a part of me and a part of Larry, all knit together perfectly. Only God could do that."

For an instant Jamie understood.

She'd felt that same sense of wonder the first time she held Sierra. Every time she'd held her since then, for that matter. But it wasn't God she was sensing. It was life itself. As Sue had said, the miracle of life. Jamie dusted the sand off her ankles and met Sue's eyes. "If there is a God ... why doesn't He put out fires before our guys have to fight them?"

A sigh slipped from Sue's lips. "This isn't heaven, Jamie. Nothing's going to be perfect here. But even still, God's in control."

"But how do you know?" Jamie gestured toward the sea. "You and Larry and Jake talk about heaven like you've been there. But there's no guarantee. And if God's willing to let us suffer here on earth, why should I

believe He has something better for me after I die?"

Sue spread her fingers over her heart, her voice barely audible above the ocean breeze. "It's a knowing, Jamie. A sureness, a certainty. With everything in me I believe in God, and I'm convinced that life here is just a shadow of what's to come. Earth is like a giant waiting area." She pointed heavenward. "Up there, that's when real life will begin."

They were quiet again. Jamie stood and stretched. "Sorry for the tangent." She smiled at Sue. "Not exactly relaxing beach conversation."

Sue worked her eyebrows together. For an instant Jamie wondered if her friend might say something to refute her statement. But instead the lines eased on Sue's face and she set her Diet Coke down on the sand.

"Any time, Jamie. If you ever wanna talk about God, I'm here. Okay?"

"Okay." Jamie crossed her arms and studied the water until she spotted the distant jet ski. "Didn't see you at the funeral Sunday."

"No." Sue drew a deep breath. "I'm not much for fire department funerals."

"But God's still in control, right? Even when a twenty-seven-year-old proby reels out a fire hose and falls over dead from a heart attack?"

Sue's eyes grew wide and Jamie chided herself. Her tone had been cold, almost biting, but she hadn't meant it that way. She wasn't trying to argue, just prove a point.

"I'm sorry." Jamie reached out and touched her friend's arm. "You don't have to answer that."

"No." Sue cleared her throat. "I want to answer you." She bent forward and hugged her knees to her chest. "Yes ... God's still in control, even at a proby's funeral. Somewhere, somehow, God has a plan in all of it. Even if we can't understand that plan right now."

"So God's in control ... and you trust Him completely, right?" Jamie was baffled. This was the very reason she struggled with the notion of God. Because if there was a God, He wasn't fair. Some people lived untouched



by tragedy into their eighties and nineties, while others—people like her parents or the proby—died tragic deaths with babies and loved ones waiting back home. “Even in death?”

“Yes.” Sue’s voice was full, passionate. “Even in death.”

“Okay ...” The argumentative tone was gone from Jamie’s voice. In its place was a question that came from the depths of her soul. “Then, why don’t I see you at the funerals?”

“Because ...” Sue stared across the beach at Katy and Sierra. When she answered, it seemed to come from the very deepest places in her soul. “Because I can’t bear to think that someday God’s plan might include a fire department funeral for Larry.”

## Drie

7 September 2001

Die waterponie vlieg teen tagtig kilometer per uur oor die water.

Dis ’n ongewoon sonnige Septemberoggend en onder die skoon, blou hemel voel Jake hoe sy vrou haar gesig teen sy rug verberg. Hy is mal oor die gevoel van haar liggaam teen syne; dit laat hom groter as sy voel, sterker. Asof sy hom nodig het – selfs al is dit net vir ’n paar minute op die oop water.

Dis die sewende September, die dag waarna hulle die hele week uitgesien het. Hy het een Vrydag per maand af en solank die weer saamspeel, spandeer hulle dit net duskant South Beach. Gewoonlik het hulle die waterponie teen hierdie tyd van die jaar al weggesit. Maar nie hierdie September nie. Jake kan nie onthou wanneer laas hy so ’n mooi herfs beleef het nie.

Hierdie keer het Sue en Larry Henning en hulle kinders saamgekom. Die twee paartjies maak beurte om die kinders in die water dop te hou. Die Hennings se dogtertjie, Katy, is Sierra se beste maatjie. Die dogtertjies is albei vier en sal oor ’n jaar kleuterskool toe gaan. Larry en Sue het ook ’n baba van ses maande, maar sy oupa en oma het aangebied om vandag na hom te kyk.

Larry .... Hy en Jake is al van skooldae af beste vriende. Hulle het saam opleiding ontvang en het dieselfde maand as brandweermanne begin. Dit het ’n paar jaar geduur voordat hulle by dieselfde stasie was, maar dis nou al ses jaar dat hulle saam in Manhattan, Enjin 57, werk.

Larry se knieë is nie meer wat hulle was nie. Al die jare op die voetbalveld – op skool sowel as vir die brandweerspan – het hulle tol geëis. Maar hy laat nooit ’n kans verbygaan om saam met Jake strand toe te kom nie.

“’n Uur op die water,” sê Larry dikwels, “is ’n week se ys op my knieë werd.”

Jake gooi 'n wye draai en voel hoe Jamie haar gesig kant toe draai sodat sy die koue water op haar gesig kan voel. Hy weet wat sy dink, want sy het dit al honderde kere vir hom gesê. Sy is mal daaroor om saam met hom op die water te wees, mal oor die spoed en die gevoel van hulle liggame wat saam met die masjien werk.

Sy leun tot naby sy oor. "My beurt."

Hy knik, skakel die enjin af en nadat hulle tot stilstand gekom het, swaai hy hom met gemak om haar sodat sy voor kan sit. Hy knie haar speels in haar ribbes. "Moet ons net nie verongeluk nie."

"Kom nou, ou sissie." Jamie lag en loer na hom oor haar linkerskouer. "'n Bietjie spoed het nog nooit seergemaak nie."

Hy is mal oor die tergende klank in haar stem, die vonkel in haar oë. Hy hou sy hande oor sy oë. "Sê wanneer ek kan kyk."

Sy lag kop agteroor toe sy die enjin aanskakel. Jake is die een met die gevaarlike loopbaan. Jamie is immers 'n tuisblyma. Die grootste gevaar wat haar werk inhou, is kosmaak.

Maar wanneer dit by ontspanning kom, is Jamie 'n adrenaliënverslaafde.

Jake rus met sy ken op haar skouer en volg haar blik na 'n motorboot 'n ent daarvandaan. "Hou vas!" Jamie se stem word deur die brullende enjin ingesluk toe sy vet gee en op die boot se aansienlike volgstroom afpyl. Jake kyk oor haar skouer en sien hoe klim die spoedmeter verby tagtig ... negentig ... vyf-en-negentig ...

Dis Jamie. Diep in haar hart is sy vrou angsbevange dat hy hom by die werk gaan beseer, maar hier is sy meer as bereid om albei hulle lewens op 'n uitstappie te waag. Hy laat sak sy hande na Jamie se dun middel. Sy het nog altyd hierdie wilde streep gehad, selfs toe hulle nog kinders was.

Die ander voetballers het dit nie gewaag om met Jamie Steele uit te gaan nie. "Sy's 'n *babe*, moet my nie verkeerd verstaan nie," het Larry een herfs vir Jake gesê. "Maar sy sal 'n beter "quarterback" as helfte van die ouens in die span maak. Sy sal 'n man uithaal as jy haar verkeerd opvryf."

Larry was destyds waarskynlik reg.

Jamie was die ster in die basketbalspan, vanger vir die sagtebalspan en staatskampioen in spiesgooi. Sover Jake weet, staan die rekords wat sy in die laat tagtigerjare opgestel het steeds.

Toe hulle verhouding na hoërskool ernstiger raak, het sy en Jake af en toe in Wolfe's Pond Park gaan stap. Na 'n paar minute het hulle altyd dieselfde stuk grondpad bereik, en Jamie sou hom op die skouer tik. "Laaste een is 'n vrot pampoen!" Dan het sy weggespring en voluit tot aan die einde van die pad gehardloop.

Dit het Jake altyd 'n paar sekondes geneem om uit die spreekwoordelike blokke te kom, maar Jamie het 'n paar keer sowaar eerste gekom. Sonder dat hy haar laat wen het. Ná die resies het hulle tot by die eerste boom gestrompel en hygend daaronder neergeval. Toe hulle op 'n keer so daar lê, het Jake ondersoekend na haar gekyk en sy kop geskud. "Vir wie of wat hardloop jy

weg, Jamie?”

Sy het op haar maag gedraai en met 'n grassie gespeel. “Vir jou.”

Hy het aanvaar dat sy hom verkeerd verstaan het en sy kop geskud. “Ek praat nie van die resies nie, mamparra. Ek bedoel die lewe. Dis asof jy altyd besig is om van iets of iemand te vlug. Wat jaag jou?”

Sy het lank na hom gekyk, haar oë nadenkend. “Ek sê mos.”

“Vir my?” Hy het sy kop skeef gehou. “Vlug jy vir my?”

“Jip.” Sy het haar elumboë in die sagte grond geplant en haar ken op haar hande laat rus. “Ek het al hierdie ... ek weet nie, goeters in my hart. Gevoelens en emosies ... amper 'n soort energie. Baie meer as wat ek behoort te hê.” Sy het skeef geglimlag. “Hoe meer ek daarvan vir my sport gebruik, hoe minder het ek vir jou.”

Hy het teen die boom geleun en gevoel hoe hy sy hart verloor. “Is dit so?”

“Ja.” Haar oë het in die middagson geglinster. “As daar dan ooit iets met jou moet gebeur, sal ek nie myself verloor nie.”

Daarna was daar tye – in die eerste jaar van hulle huwelik – toe Jake haar aan daardie gesprek herinner het. Maar sy het voorgegee sy onthou nie. “Jy gee nie alles nie, Jamie. Hoekom?”

“Dis nie waar nie.” Sy het verras, selfs seergemaak gelyk. “Alles wat ek het om te gee, is joune, Jake. Jy weet dit.”

Hy het haar bestudeer, probeer peil. “Onthou jy daardie dag by Wolfe’s Pond? Jy het gesê dat jy nie alles kan gee nie, vir ingeval daar iets met my gebeur. Omdat jy nie jouself wou verloor nie, onthou? Asof jy bang was om my te lief te hê.”

Sy het haar donker hare teruggegooi en haar kop geskud. “Ek is dalk kompetierend. En ek bekommer my oor jou werk. Maar ek is nie bang om jou lief te hê nie, Jake.” Sy het sy gesig tussen haar hande geneem en diep in sy oë gekyk. “Ek hou nie terug nie, my skat. Nie met jou nie. Nooit nie.”

Maar sy het. En sy doen steeds.

Hy sien dit veral op sulke dae wanneer sy met vuur in haar bloed kruis en dwars deur die hawe jaag, verbete om die een of ander onsigbare verskrikking af te skud, iets wat sy bang is haar sal vang as sy nie vlug nie. Jake moet vashou om nie agteroor te val nie.

Indien sy nie van hom af weghardloop nie, vlug sy dalk van die Here. Jake is desperaat dat God op 'n manier tot haar moet deurdring. Hy bid elke dag daaroor, maar tot nou toe het Jamie nog geen belangstelling getoon nie.

Ongeag wat dit is, Jamie vlug van iets. Daarvan is Jake oortuig.

Hulle bereik die motorboot en pyl reguit op die volgstroom af.

“Hou vas,” gil sy.

Hulle tref die brander in volle vaart, en hang amper twee sekondes in die lug voordat hulle die water slaan en dan deur die volgende brander gelanseer word. Hierdie keer slaan hulle amper om.

“Stadig, Jamie.” Hy gee haar skouers 'n sagte drukkie. “Moenie kop verloor nie.”

Sy verminder spoed en gooi 'n wye draai. “Hoe lank voor ons moet terug wees?”

Jake kyk op sy horlosie. “Vyf minute.”

“Maklik.” Sy mik weer vir die boot se volgstroom en gee vet. Na die tyd neem sy hulle teen 'n volmaakte kurwe terug strand toe. “Maak dit drie.”

Jamie laat sak haar kop voordat sy gas gee en hulle teen 'n ongelooflike snelheid oor die water laat skiet. Jake is nie bekommerd nie. Hulle albei kan swem, en Jamie is te ervare om toe te laat dat hulle op die oop water iets oorkom. Maar wanneer hy teen haar leun en haar kaal rug teen sy bors voel, weet hy dat hy nooit die band met haar sal hê waarna hy smag nie, die intimiteit waartoe sy in staat is nie.

Nie terwyl sy weghardloop nie.

*Hy tuur na die silhoeët van die stad en die yl wolkies. Here, as sy besig is om van U te vlug, asseblief ... vang haar. Sy is so bang ... bang vir verlies en verandering en die dood. Bang vir U. Ek weet nie wat anders om te doen nie, Here. Help haar om tot stilstand te kom ... Wat dit ook al verg.*

'n Seemeeu duik naby hulle toe Jamie die enjin afskakel en die waterponie uiteindelik op die sand tot stilstand kom. Sierra en Katy kom aangehardloop, hulle knieë en enkels vol sand.

Jake soen Jamie in haar nek. “Dit was lekker.”

“Dankie.” Jamie is uitasem en haar wange rooi. “Ek sal vir altyd so kan aangaan.”

Jake glimlag, maar haar woorde bring 'n swarigheid oor sy hart. Waarvan sy ook al vlug, dit jaag haar steeds. Terwyl hulle die waterponie parkeer en na Larry en Sue toe loop, bly Jake se gedagtes om sy vrou draai. Gaan sy vir altyd bly hardloop? Of gaan sy dapper genoeg wees om haar deur hom te laat vang?

Deur hom en veral deur God.

Jamie en Sue bly by die dogtertjies sodat die mans op die waterponie kan uitgaan. Die vroue het hulle strandstoele nader aan die water, binne hoorafstand van Sierra en Katy af, kom neersit.

“Ek's seker Katy het vyf sentimeter gegroei sedert ons laas so gekuier het.”

Jamie skerm haar oë sodat sy na die klein dogtertjies voor hulle kan kyk.

“Sy aard na my kant van die familie.” Sue neem 'n blikkie Diet Coke. “My ma is amper ses voet.”

“Sy kan gelukkig wees. Sy sal eerste vir die basketbalspan gekies word.”

Jamie leun terug. “Nie soos ons kortetjies wat vir elke speelbeurt op die baan moes werk nie.”

Hulle bly stil en Sue tuur oor die water na hulle mans. “Dis vir my so lekker om hulle so saam te sien.” Sy verskuif haar blik na Jamie. “Hulle is so eenders. Amper soos broers.”

Jamie kry 'n botteltjie sonskerm raakgevat, druk die warm vloeistof in haar hande uit en begin haar voorarms insmeer. Dit voel heerlik warm teen haar vel en die koue van die jaagtog deur die hawe neem stadig die wyk. “Ek is bly dat

hulle dieselfde skofte werk.” Sy kyk na Sue. “Dis goed om te weet dat hulle ’n ogie oor mekaar hou.”

“Larry sê Jake sal nooit toelaat dat hy by die werk iets oorkom nie.” Sue gee ’n laggie. “Asof Jake oor bonatuurlike kragte beskik, of iets.”

“Jake voel dieselfde oor Larry.” Jamie sit die botteltjie sonskerm op die sand neer. “Hulle maak ’n goeie span uit.”

“Soos ’n tweeling wat met geboorte geskei is.” Sue glimlag in die rigting van die twee mans wat besig is om dieper die see in te versnel. “Selfs al lyk hulle glad nie na mekaar nie.”

Jamie laat sak haar arms op die armleunings en tuur na die horison. Sue is reg. Wat voorkoms betref, is die mans teenoorgesteldes. Jake is amper 1,9 meter lank, lenig en gespierd en het kort, donker hare en blou oë. Larry, ’n spierbol van negentig kilogram, beweeg soos ’n tenk en staan skaars 1,8 meter in sy stewels. Tipies rooikop, is sy vel lig en vol sproete.

Jamie skud haar kop. “Jy moes hulle op hoërskool gesien het. ’n Meer onpaar paar kon jy nie kry nie.”

“Ek kan my net voorstel.”

“Larry was die wilde een ... en Jake, die nugter hoofseuntipe.” Jamie grawe in haar sak en trek ’n wit kepsie laag oor haar voorkop. ’n Briesie streel oor haar vel en sy asem die seelug in. “Jy sal nie glo wat hulle alles aangevang het nie.”

“Soos wat?”

Jamie sluit haar oë vir ’n oomblik en tas na een van die honderde herinneringe. “Soos die keer toe Larry die voetbalspan oortuig het om in die middel van die nag hier op die strand te kom fiksheidsoefeninge doen.”

“In die middel van die nag?”

“Ja.” Jamie lig haar wenkbrou. “In die middel van die winter.” Die herinnering laat haar lag. “Die ouens se hare het al begin vries voordat Jake gesê het hulle moes mekaar weer by die skool kry.”

“Hmmm.” Sue kyk weer na die see en Jamie volg haar blik. Die mans is net ’n spikkeltjie op die horison. “Ek wens ek kon daar gewees het.”

“Dit voel amper asof jy daar was.” Sierra waai vir haar en Jamie wuif terug. “Jy en Larry het op kollege ontmoet, nê?”

“In ons eerste jaar. Toe die kampus se Bybelstudiegroep vir die derde keer bymeekaargekom het.”

Iets aan die woorde plaas ’n demper op Jamie se gemoed en vir ’n rukkie sê sy niks nie. Gewoonlik gesels sy nie saam wanneer Larry of Sue of selfs Jake na enigiets godsdienstig verwys nie. Maar om die een of ander rede voel sy nou genoodsaak om te vra. Sy draai na haar vriendin en kyk ondersoekend na haar. “Is dit regtig so wonderlik?”

Sue kyk onbegrypend na haar. “Wat?”

“Kerk ... Bybelstudie ... jy weet, godsdienstige goed.” Jamie praat stadig, nadenkend. “Na al hierdie jare is jy steeds geïnteresseerd, maar hoekom? Wat is so wonderlik daaraan?”

“Hô-ô.” Sue kreukel haar neus. “Is Jake besig om jou in ’n rigting te druk?”

“Nee.” Jamie lag ten spyte van die toenemende spanning in haar binneste. “Hy doen dit die laaste paar jaar glad nie meer nie. Hy weet van beter.” Haar stem raak weer ernstig. “Ek wonder net. Waarom al die moeite? Ons het reeds so min tyd saam. Hoekom moet hy Sondagoggende in ’n bedompige gebou gaan sit en liedjies sing?”

Sue se gesig is vol vrede toe sy ’n slukkie koeldrank neem. “Dit gaan nie oor geboue of liedjies nie.” Haar stem is sonder ’n sweempie kritiek. “Dit gaan oor gelowiges wat as groep bymekaarkom en verklaar hulle glo ... dat hulle ’n Verlosser nodig het en dat die week nie dieselfde sal wees as hulle nie tyd maak om dit te bely en uit te leef nie.”

Jamie ervaar ’n onrustige vertwyfeling. “So jy wil daar wees?”

“Ja.” Sue se uitdrukking is simpatiek. “Jy moet een keer saam met Jake gaan, Jamie. Een Sondag sal nie seermaak nie.”

Die idee laat haar krapperig voel. “As ek in God geglo het, sou ek gegaan het.”

“O.” Sue wag ’n paar oomblikke voordat sy antwoord. “Glo jy nog steeds nie?” Sy wys na die dogtertjies. Hulle het ’n sandkasteel gebou en is besig om ’n grag te grawe. “Selfs noudat Sierra in julle lewe gekom het?”

“Bedoelende?” Jamie sien nie die verband nie.

“Kinders. Die wonder van die lewe.” Sue haal haar skouers op. “As enigiets my ooit oortuig het dat daar werklik ’n God is, was dit die oomblik toe ek Katy die eerste keer vasgehou het. Sy was ’n stukkie van my en Larry, volmaak saamgeweef. Net die Here kan so iets doen.”

Vir ’n oomblik verstaan Jamie. Sy het dieselfde verwondering ervaar toe sy Sierra die eerste maal vasgehou het. Trouens, ook elke keer daarna. Maar dis nie van God wat sy bewus raak nie, dis die lewe self. Die wonder van die lewe, soos Sue sê. Jamie vee die sand van haar enkels af en ontmoet Sue se oë. “As daar ’n God is ... hoekom maak Hy nie vure dood voordat ons mans dit hoef te doen nie?”

’n Sug ontsnap oor Sue se lippe. “Dit is nie die hemel nie, Jamie. En al gaan niks op hierdie aarde ooit volmaak wees nie, is God steeds in beheer.”

“Maar hoe weet jy dit?” Jamie beduie na die see. “Jy en Larry en Jake praat oor die hemel asof julle al daar was. Maar daar is geen waarborge nie. En as God bereid is om ons hier op aarde te laat ly, hoekom moet ek glo dat Hy eendag iets beters vir my bestem het?”

Sue plaas haar hand op haar bors, haar stem skaars hoorbaar bokant die seebriesie. “Dit is ’n wete, Jamie. ’n Sekerheid. Ek glo met my hele wese in God, en ek is daarvan oortuig dat hierdie lewe slegs ’n skadu is van dit wat gaan kom. Die aarde is soos ’n reuse wagkamer.” Sy wys na die hemel. “Die ware lewe begin daarbo.”

Hulle raak weer stil. Jamie staan op en strek haar uit. “Ek weet nie hoekom ek nou hieroor begin praat het nie.” Sy glimlag vir Sue. “Dis nie regtig die soort gesprek wat ’n mens op die strand wil voer nie.”

Sue frons en Jamie wonder vir 'n oomblik of haar vriendin iets gaan sê om haar stelling te weerlê. Maar die lyne op Sue se voorkop verdwyn en sy sit haar Diet Coke op die sand neer.

“Enige tyd, Jamie. Ek is hier as jy ooit oor die Here wil praat. Oukei?”

“Oukei.” Jamie vou haar arms en kyk oor die water totdat sy die waterponie in die verte sien. “Ek het jou nie Sondag by die begrafnis gesien nie.”

“Nee.” Sue trek haar asem diep in. “Ek’s nie een vir brandweerbegrafnisse nie.”

“Maar God is steeds in beheer, nè? Selfs wanneer ’n sewe-en-twintigjarige junior brandweerman ’n brandslang inkatrol, ’n hartaanval kry en dood neerslaan?”

Sue se oë rek en Jamie verwens haarself. Haar stem was koud, amper snedig, maar sy het dit nie so bedoel nie. Sy wou nie argumenteer nie, net ’n punt bewys.

“Ek’s jammer.” Jamie steek haar hand uit en raak aan haar vriendin se arm.

“Jy hoef my nie te antwoord nie.”

“Nee.” Sue maak haar keel skoon. “Ek wil jou antwoord.” Sy vou haar arms om haar opgetrekte knieë. “Ja, God is steeds in beheer, selfs by ’n jong man se begrafnis. Iewers, op een of ander manier het God ’n plan in al hierdie dinge. Selfs al kan ons daardie plan nie nou al verstaan nie.”

“God is dus in beheer, en jy vertrou Hom onvoorwaardelik?” Jamie is oorbluf. Dit is die einste rede waarom sy haar nie met die idee van ’n God kan vereenselwig nie. Want as daar ’n God is, is Hy nie regverdig nie. Sommige mense lewe tot in hulle tagtiger- en negentigerjare sonder om ooit deur ’n tragedie geraak te word, terwyl ander – soos haar ouers of die junior brandweerman – tragies sterf met babas en geliefdes wat by die huis op hulle wag. “Selfs in die dood?”

“Ja.” Sue se stem is ryk en vol deernis. “Selfs in die dood.”

“Oukei ... ” Die twissoekerigheid is weg uit Jamie se stem. In die plek daarvan is daar ’n vraag wat diep uit haar binneste kom. “Hoekom sien ek jou dan nie by die begrafnis nie?”

“Want ... ” Sue kyk na waar Katy en Sierra in die sand doenig is. Toe sy antwoord, kom dit asof uit die diepste plek in haar hart. “Want ek kan dit nie verduur om te dink dat God se plan eendag dalk so ’n begrafnis vir Larry insluit nie.”

# Chapter FOUR

SEPTEMBER 7, 2001

Laura pulled out of her driveway and turned her car toward the setting sun. It was a fifteen-minute drive to church, and she was grateful for the solitude. A handful of women were getting together to box up supplies they'd collected for an orphanage in Haiti. The church's college group was going to Port-au-Prince in a few weeks to paint the main building. The supplies would go ahead of them as part of an outreach.

Laura was on the planning committee.

Temperatures had spiked across the San Fernando Valley again, and that night as she made her way down the hill toward Thousand Oaks Boulevard, it was still ninety-two degrees. Laura rolled her window down and rested her arm on the door.

Originally, Eric had agreed to work with her on this project. But he hadn't had time once so far, and tonight's meeting was the last before the outreach. In the past Laura had gone to church angry, clenching the steering wheel, wondering the whole evening long why her husband wasn't with her.

But not this time.

Since his fiasco with Josh's birthday the other day, the two of them had barely spoken to each other. Tonight he was staying home with Josh, spending time with their son for the first time all week. Laura was grateful for the time alone. She turned right and settled against the back of her seat.

She knew what she was supposed to do. Go to church and help pack the supplies for Haiti, then come home and talk to Eric, tell him it was time to call a counselor. But this time the whole routine felt pointless and tiresome. They weren't kidding anyone anymore, not the people at church, not Josh, not God. Not even each other. Why make an appointment for counseling if nothing was going to change?



Laura squinted behind her sunglasses and flipped down the visor. If only she had the guts to throw in the towel, turn the car around and storm up the drive, find Eric, and demand a divorce. It was the only thing that would set either of them free at this point.

*God ... help me.*

The silent cry came from the depths of her soul and made the corners of her eyes sting.

*Daughter ... I am with you ... I know the plans I have for you, plans to give you a hope and a future and not to harm you ...*

The Scripture came as easily as Laura's next breath, the same way it always had. Since she was adopted as a young teenager, she'd clung to the promise, believing that God truly knew the plans He had for her. Believing they were good. But what place did the words have in her life now? Good plans and hope? A future? The loveless routine she shared with Eric was hardly that. And what good could possibly come from their life together?

Then, like the streaky lines across the summer sky, the answer came. Josh, of course. Josh was the good that had come from the two of them. Back from a time and place when she and Eric had loved each other more than life itself. And Josh was the one who would pay the price if she asked for a divorce.

She turned her car into the church parking lot, pulled into a front row space, and turned off the engine. For a moment she sat there, letting her head fall against the steering wheel. No, she couldn't divorce Eric, not ever. He hadn't done anything wrong. He'd never cheated on her or slapped her or called her a bad name. He'd rarely said an unkind word.

The familiar sting in her eyes grew stronger. She whisked her sunglasses off and tossed them on the seat beside her. As she did, a tear fell on her jean shorts and made a tiny wet circle on the denim. She'd been looking forward to the time alone, but not so she could break down. This was no time to cry. The committee would be there in five minutes, and the next few hours would culminate months of planning and collecting. Their

efforts would help dozens of children in Haiti have food and medicine and school supplies.

So what was the problem? Why did she feel like her world was falling apart, like a part of her heart would never breathe again?

Laura wiped her eyes and sniffed twice. The answer was obvious. It wasn't what Eric had done that made her miserable, it was what he hadn't done. What he'd stopped doing somewhere along the trail of years. Whenever it was that he'd stopped keeping promises, when he'd stopped taking her on dates or spending a few moments with Josh.

With Eric she shared little more than a functional business relationship. None of the love and passion she'd hoped to find by marrying the man, none of the magic they'd shared in their first few years together. But those weren't grounds for divorce—not even close.

She gripped the steering wheel. *God ... there's no way out. Give me something, a sign, a reason to believe it'll get better one day.* She was trapped in a prison of pretense and promises, and unless Eric had a change of heart, her sentence would last a lifetime. Because being president of Koppel and Grant wouldn't be enough for Eric; neither would making a million dollars. There would still be one more deal, one more meeting, one more corporate account to conquer.

And those things would always take precedence over her and Josh.

She wiped her eyes and lifted her head just as she heard footsteps come up along the side of her car.

“Laura?”

She jerked her head up, and there, standing just outside her car door, was Eric's brother, Clay. “Oh, hey.” As quick as she could, she grabbed her sunglasses and slipped them back on. She managed a smile. “You scared me.”

Clay leaned closer and rested his forearms against the roof of her Escalade. “You're crying.”

“No.” A plastic laugh forced its way across her lips. “Just a long day.”

He cocked his head and studied her. "You sure?"

"Yes." She sniffed again. "What're you doing here?"

Clay nodded over his shoulder to the church building. "Picking up a packet for Sunday school." His grin was easy. "Second grade starts a new unit this Sunday." He hesitated. "You here for the mission meeting?"

Laura nodded. She was grateful for the chance to collect herself. Clay knew her too well to be tricked, and the last thing she wanted was for this to be the moment when Clay finally understood the truth about her marriage.

Clay took a step back and leaned against a van parked next to Laura's. "Isn't Eric supposed to be with you?"

"He's too busy. Couldn't make the meetings."

"Oh." Clay hesitated. "What about Josh?"

"Eric's with him." She forced the corners of her lips up again. "Just the two of them."

"That's good."

Laura drew a slow breath. "How was work?"

"No car chases all week." He grinned at her. "Must be some kind of record."

Laura's gaze fell to her hands. She hadn't seen Clay since the pizza place, and she needed to thank him. "Hey, about the birthday party ..." She climbed out of the car, shut the door, and leaned against it so that she faced Clay. "Thanks for showing up. It meant a lot to Josh."

"Eric should've been there." Something just short of anger flickered in Clay's expression. He locked onto Laura's eyes a beat longer than necessary. "It's a pattern, isn't it?"

For an instant Laura had the strange urge to defend Eric. He was her husband, after all, and his work schedule had been this way since long before Josh was born. But she couldn't do it. Clay was right. Eric wasn't around enough, it was that simple.

"Yes. For a while now." She looked at a spot on the ground near her

feet. *No tears, God. Please. Not here, not now.* “He and Josh barely know each other.”

“He’s crazy.” Clay clenched his teeth and let the air ease through them. “He works so hard he doesn’t know what he’s missing.”

Laura looked at him and tried to read into that last sentence. She wanted to ask exactly what he meant, whether he was talking about Josh or her. But she knew better. There were certain lines in-laws didn’t cross. Even if they’d been friends since high school. She found Clay’s eyes again. “It could be worse.”

“Yes.” The depth in Clay’s eyes looked suddenly more pronounced. “Eric’s a good guy, but ... well, maybe his priorities need a little rearranging.” Clay shrugged. “He should’ve been at the party.”

She nodded, and Clay seemed to sense that the conversation was hard on her.

He leaned his head back and stared at the pink and orange sky above them. “Josh had fun ... that’s all that matters.”

An image flashed in Laura’s mind. Eric holding court with his colleagues at Koppel and Grant, waxing on about the virtues of one stock over the other, while Clay played air hockey with Josh at Chuck E. Cheese’s. That didn’t make Eric a bad guy, exactly. Lots of fathers worked too many hours, and she should be grateful Josh had someone like Clay. But instead of feeling grateful, her soul ached at the impossible situation she was in.

Clay strained to see her eyes. “Talk to him, okay?”

“Okay.”

Then without saying another word, he pulled her into a hug, the kind they’d shared a thousand times before, but one Laura needed more than air. “I’m here for you, Laura. For both of you. Don’t let anything crazy happen.”

Laura slid her fingers beneath her glasses and wiped at an errant tear. “We won’t.”

“Good.” He drew back and patted his hand against her cheek. “You’re my two favorite people in the world.”

She sniffed and pulled away, reaching into her car for her purse. “I know.”

“Come on.” Clay took a step toward the church. “Everything’s gonna be fine.”

Three hours later Laura pulled into their driveway. Something about seeing Clay, hearing his optimism had lit a spark in her heart. Maybe it wasn’t too late. Maybe they could get counseling again and make real changes this time. If they’d loved each other once, then somehow, someway God could lead them back to that place, right?

She was about to step out of her car when she noticed something strange. A car sat parked in their driveway, and Laura stared at it, confused. It was nearly ten o’clock on a Friday night. Who could’ve been visiting at that hour? She grabbed her things and headed inside. Josh was sitting at the dining room table writing something, and next to him was Jenna, their baby-sitter.

Laura froze in place, trying to make sense of what she was seeing. “Hello, Jenna.” She hesitated. “I expected to see Mr. Michaels.”

The teenager smiled and slid an eraser across the table to Josh. “He got called into work.” She pointed to a stack of notepaper. “Josh and I were doing a little multiplication.”

Laura set her things down and made her way slowly into the dining room. The moment she saw Josh’s bloodshot eyes, she knew. Eric had done it again, made a promise and then broken it without a second thought as to how it would affect Josh.

Anger trampled over Laura’s optimism, and she held her tongue. She wouldn’t talk about their troubles in front of Jenna. Laura pulled her wallet from her purse. “What time did you get here?”

“Just before seven.” Jenna tousled Josh’s hair and gave Laura a knowing look. “He’s had a hard night.”

Just before seven? Laura could've strangled Eric. She'd left for church at six-forty-five. That meant she hadn't been gone ten minutes when he called Jenna and headed off for work. Laura ordered herself to stay calm. "Did he say when he'd be home?"

"Actually ..." An uneasy expression filled Jenna's face. "He was gone by the time I got here. He said it was an emergency."

"You mean ..." Laura's heart skipped a beat and then slid into an unrecognizable rhythm. "He left Josh alone?"

"Just for a few minutes. I told him I'd be right over, so he put a video on for Josh." Jenna directed her next sentence toward the child. "You were right where you were supposed to be, huh, buddy?"

Josh nodded and cast Laura a look that was part anger, part unspeakable sorrow. Laura gave him a weak smile. "We'll talk in a minute, okay?"

He hung his head and stared at his paper.

Laura motioned for Jenna to follow, and the two of them moved across the house toward the front door. When they were alone in the foyer, Laura sighed. "Was Josh crying when you got here?"

Jenna kept her voice low. "Sobbing." She frowned. "Poor little guy. It took him half an hour to calm down."

Laura's blood moved from hot to boiling. She paid Jenna and stood there, staring at the tiles that made up their entryway. The fury inside her was so strong she couldn't move. How dare Eric do this? After what had happened on Josh's birthday ... and with a trip to New York tomorrow morning? Her anger became rage. Maybe she should drive to Koppel and Grant's offices and tell Eric it was time. A separation was the only way to stop the damage to Josh.

But that wasn't possible, not now anyway. Not with Josh sitting defeated and brokenhearted in the next room.

She exhaled slowly. *God ... get me through this. How can I love Eric and hate him all at the same time?* She returned to the dining room and

found her son at the table. “Josh?” Without making a sound, she took the seat beside him and reached for his hands. “What did Daddy tell you?”

Huge tears welled up in Josh's eyes, and he barely lifted one shoulder. “It was a special meeting. A 'mergency.” Josh sniffed and ran the back of his hand beneath his eyes. No doubt he wanted to be strong in front of her. The sadness, the disappointment, was simply too great. “He said he'd make it up to me when he comes back from New York.”

“Well ...” Laura clenched her teeth. It was the same thing Eric always said. “He is extra busy before a trip, Josh.” The words were purely for Josh's sake. So the child wouldn't hate his father. “I'm sure he wanted to stay.”

“Sometimes I think ...” Josh twisted his face, and a sob sounded from deep in his chest. “He doesn't even like me, Mom.”

“Josh!” She pulled the boy close, silently cursing Eric for everything he'd never been to the boy. “That isn't true. Your father's a very busy man. Just because he isn't home much doesn't mean he doesn't like you.” She soothed her hand down his back and felt his small body jerk and twitch as he began to sob. “He loves you, buddy. Really.”

“If ... if he loves me, why didn't he come to my birthday party?” Josh grabbed three quick breaths. “And why did he leave me all alone tonight?”

Laura's heart throbbed. She had no answers for her son. She wanted to tell him he was reading his father wrong, that the man hadn't always been this way, and that come next week things would be back to normal. But as far back as she could remember, this series of missed moments and broken promises was the most normal thing either of them knew.

“Next weekend—” She stopped herself. What about next weekend? Would Eric even remember his promise to take Josh to the beach, to buy him a boogie board, and play with him on the shore all day? Why would he? Surely, there'd be a dozen meetings to follow up the trip to New York. And someone's stock performance was bound to put Koppel and Grant in a tailspin. It happened every time. Eric might still have the audacity to make

promises to Josh, but Laura couldn't bring herself to repeat them.

Her son was staring at her, his eyes puffy and red. "Next weekend what?"

Laura pulled back and sat straighter in her chair. "I was thinking of the beach."

"You know what?" Josh pulled one leg up and hugged his knee to his chest. "I don't like the beach. I want a basketball so Dad could take me to the park to shoot. Like the other dads."

Several times that past summer, Josh had gone to the park with his friends and their fathers, and even with Clay once. The gym was open all day Saturday, and local fathers and sons had adopted the place. Josh had mentioned it to Eric three times at least, but Eric was either busy at his computer, or going over a list of documents, or about to make a phone call. He'd wave Josh off and nod quickly. "Sure, son ... you bet. One of these days we'll go to the park and shoot hoops."

But it had never happened.

A minute passed, and Josh's crying subsided. He dried his face once more, stood, and kissed Laura. "I'm going to bed. Tell Dad I'll see him next week."

"I love you, Josh."

"You too." He started to walk off, then stopped and turned around. "I wish Uncle Clay was my daddy. That'd be so cool."

Laura's remaining resolve crumbled like ancient pottery. "I'm sorry, Josh."

"That's okay." He slumped forward a bit. His chin almost touched his chest as he walked off. "G'night."

She listened while he made his way up the stairs toward his bedroom. When the door closed, she grabbed the cordless phone from the wall and dialed Eric's office number. A young woman answered on the third ring.

"Hello?" Her voice was perky.

Laura wanted to scream. "Eric Michaels, please."



“Eric ... let's see.” She covered up the phone to muffle her voice. “Someone tell Eric he has a phone call.”

*Eric?* Who was the girl, and what was she doing there after ten on a Friday night?

A minute passed and Eric picked up the phone. “Hello?”

“You left Josh *alone*?” Her tone was a pinched mix of shock and controlled fury.

“Laura, let me explain.” He paused a moment too long.

“No.” She huffed. “You're too late. Your son went to sleep in tears, Eric.”

“Look, I don't need a guilt trip. I feel bad enough.”

“Oh, I can tell.” She raised her voice. “What could be so important you had to leave our son alone, Eric? What?”

“A teleconference from New York, that's what.” He hesitated. “The minute you left, Murphy called wondering where I was. The call was scheduled for seven-thirty.”

“That's ten-thirty New York time.” Laura gave a short laugh. “Even a man like Allen couldn't possibly keep hours like that.”

“What's that supposed to mean?”

“It means after a while the stories get old.” She took the phone into the living room and dropped onto the edge of the leather recliner. “Who answered the phone?”

“Here?”

“Yes, there. Whoever she was she called you by your first name. I thought secretaries had more class than that.”

“Her name's Vicky. She's not a secretary. She's Murphy's assistant, and she's happily married. None of us are formal with the assistants.” His tone was condescending. “Does that answer your question?”

“Look, Eric ...” The conversation was going nowhere. “I don't care if President Bush was calling you, Murphy could've handled the teleconference.” She huffed. “Josh needed you tonight. It took Jenna half

an hour to calm him down.”

“That’s ridiculous. He’s old enough to—” Eric stopped himself and paused. “I passed Jenna on my way out of the neighborhood. He wasn’t alone for three minutes, Laura.”

“Okay, so you had your phone call. You could’ve come home.”

“Things came up.” He let loose a long sigh. “You know how it is before a trip. Don’t do this now, Laura, please.”

Suddenly, she could feel Clay’s arms around her, hear him reminding her not to do anything crazy, and that everything was going to be okay. But Clay was wrong. Everything was wrong, for that matter. What was happening to her? When was the last time she’d read her Bible or prayed about her relationship with Eric? Everything that ever mattered was unraveling like a half-knit sweater, and she couldn’t think of a single way to stop it.

Worse, she didn’t want to stop it.

When she spoke again, the fight was gone from her voice. “I’m going to sleep, Eric. When you get home from New York we need to talk.”

“Talk?” For the first time that night, the slightest hint of fear spilled over into his words. “Don’t overreact, Laura. You know how busy I’ve been.”

“Yes, I know. Josh knows too.” She closed her eyes. “That’s why we need to talk.” Her voice broke, but she did her best to cover it. “We can’t go on like this, Eric. I can’t.”

Silence hovered between them, then Eric’s tired sigh sounded over the phone line. “You’re right. I get back early Thursday afternoon.” His voice was kinder than before. “I’ll come straight here and take you to dinner. I promise, Laura ... things’ll slow down. I’ll make it up to you and Josh. Give me a chance.”

Normally, Eric’s promises melted her, even though he rarely made good on them. But tonight she was too tired, too hurt to care. “Good night, Eric.”

He hesitated. "Plan on dinner, okay?"

"We'll see. I have to go."

They hung up with no declarations of love or assurances that the other would be missed. Laura returned the phone to its place on the wall and tried to remember the last time Eric had told her he loved her. Two months? Three, maybe? Was this the man she'd thought would rescue her from a childhood of sorrow and abandonment? The man she'd thought would share her dreams of happily ever after?

And what about Josh? Eric had never once told the boy he loved him, even after she confronted Eric about the issue back when their son was four. Not one time.

"You love him, don't you?" They'd been finishing up dinner, and Josh had gone out back to play.

"Josh?" Eric had looked surprised. "Of course."

"Then tell him. A boy needs to hear that from his father."

Eric had dismissed her with a wave of his hand. "That's ridiculous. My father never said it to me."

"Your father wasn't a Christian."

"Maybe I'm not either." The moment he'd said the words his face had looked stricken. "I ... I didn't mean that."

But he had meant it, of course. Eric hadn't been to church with her since the stillborn death of their tiny daughter a year after they were married. At the time Laura had thought the loss was infinitely harder on her than Eric. Until one afternoon when she came home to their small apartment and found him in the baby's bedroom, sitting in the rocking chair they'd bought at a garage sale.

It was the only time before or since that she'd seen him weep.

"Why, Laura?" He'd been utterly broken, his usual confidence shattered. "Why would God take her?"

"He didn't take her." Laura had knelt between his legs, gripping his wrists and trying her best to help him understand. "It's just one of those

things.”

“No, it's not.” He squeezed his eyes shut. “Because I'm still in school and God didn't help us and no one'll give us decent medical care. Otherwise she would've lived.”

In some ways Eric was right. A nurse at the hospital told them that their baby's death had been preventable. With ultrasound testing they could've worked on her before she was born. But without insurance, the test hadn't been an option.

Even now—so many years later—Laura could see that time in their life as a dividing line. Until then Eric's faith had been stronger than the San Gabriel Mountains. Solid and unmoving. But that night as Eric wept, something hardened in his heart. Not long afterwards he stopped going to church, stopped talking about God's will or referring to Bible verses.

Several times Laura talked to him about it. “This is because of the baby, isn't it?” Eric would only shake his head and give brief, terse answers. “The baby wasn't meant to be.”

“Then why, Eric? What's happened?”

Once when she asked him, he locked his gaze with hers and waited a moment. “We lost that little girl because I couldn't give you the very best care.” He gritted his teeth. “Life's about making your own way. And believe me, Laura, I'm not leaving that up to God. Once I get started, you'll never have to worry about medical care again.”

Eric had kept his promise. By the time Josh was born, they had the best insurance, the best doctors in Southern California. But in the years since, he'd become a driven businessman who didn't share his family's beliefs, and who couldn't muster up the words to tell his son he loved him.

Laura got undressed, slipped into a nightgown, and eased herself between the cool sheets. Eric would be up into the wee hours of the morning, packing, checking last-minute details before leaving. He'd stay in the guest room, no doubt, so she wouldn't hear from him again until Thursday.

As she fell asleep she tried to feel sorry for herself, but she couldn't. Her marriage was dying, and she and Eric were both at fault. Yes, he'd been difficult to love. But how hard had *she* tried? Why hadn't she said something the first time he slept in the guest room? And how many years had it been since she'd surprised him with a weekend getaway or a special date night?

What was it the Bible said? That little foxes were the ones that spoiled the vines? How many little foxes had she allowed in since Josh was born? Laura rolled over. Only one memory could replace the missed opportunities filling her mind.

The memory of a long-ago yesterday, back when Eric Michaels couldn't wait to leave college and race home to be with her. Once, a lifetime ago, they'd been lovers. But now—in a way that seemed almost sudden—the branches of their love had become completely barren.

And spring didn't feel like it would ever come again.

## Vier

7 September 2001

Laura trek haar motor uit die garage en ry teen die ondergaande son in. Dis 'n kwartier se ry kerk toe en sy is dankbaar vir die stilte. 'n Handvol vroue kry mekaar daar om die voorrade in te pak wat hulle vir 'n weeshuis in Haïti ingesamel het. Die kerk se studentegroep gaan oor 'n paar weke Port-au-Prince toe om die hoofgebou te gaan verf. Die voorrade word vooruit gestuur as deel van die uitreik.

Laura dien op die beplanningskomitee.

Die San Fernando Valley is weer deur 'n hittegolf getref en waar sy nou na die Thousand Oaks Boulevard ry, is dit nog steeds drie-en-dertig grade. Laura draai haar venster af en laat sak haar arm op die deur.

Aanvanklik het Eric ingestem om saam met haar aan hierdie projek te werk. Maar tot dusver het hy nie tyd gehad nie en vanaand se vergadering is die laaste voor die uitreik. In die verlede het Laura woedend kerk toe gery en die hele aand gewonder waarom haar man nie by haar was nie.

Maar nie vanaand nie.

Sedert nou die dag se fiasko met Josh se verjaarsdag het hulle skaars 'n woord met mekaar gepraat. Vanaand het hy by die huis gebly om vir die eerste keer

hierdie week 'n bietjie tyd saam met Josh deur te bring. Laura is dankbaar vir die tyd alleen. Sy draai regs en sit agteroor teen die rugleuning.

Sy weet wat sy veronderstel is om te doen. Kerk toe gaan en help om die voorrade vir Haïti te pak, dan huis toe gaan en met Eric praat, vir hom sê dis tyd om 'n berader te bel. Maar hierdie keer voel die hele proses na 'n sinnelose en uitputtende oefening. Hulle flous niemand nie, nie die mense by die kerk nie, nie Josh nie, nie die Here nie. Beslis nie mekaar nie. Hoekom moet hulle 'n berader gaan sien as niks ooit gaan verander nie?

Laura skreef haar oë agter haar donkerbril en slaan die motor se sonskerm af. As sy maar net die moed gehad het om handdoek in te gooi, om te draai en huis toe te ry, met Eric te praat en hom vir 'n egskending te dagvaar. In hierdie stadium is dit die enigste manier waarop sy haar lewe kan terugkry.

*Here ... help my.*

Die geluidlose noodkreet kom diep uit haar hart en sy voel hoe haar oë brand.

*My dogter ... Ek is by jou ... Ek weet wat ek vir jou beplan: voorspoed en nie teenspoed nie. Ek wil vir jou 'n toekoms gee, 'n verwagting ...*

Soos in die verlede kom hierdie woorde met dieselfde natuurlikheid as asemhaal. Sedert sy as 'n jong tiener aangeneem is, het sy aan hierdie belofte vasgehou, geglo dat God regtig weet wat Hy vir haar beplan. Geglo dat dit goed sou wees. Maar hoe pas daardie woorde nou by haar lewe in? Voorspoed en 'n verwagting? 'n Toekoms? Dit kan tog nie die liefdelose bestaan wees wat sy met Eric deel nie. En watter mooi kan moontlik uit hulle lewe saam kom?

Dan, soos die oranje gloed in die weste, sien sy die antwoord voor haar. Josh, natuurlik. Josh is die goeie wat uit hulle twee se saamwees gekom het. Vanuit 'n tyd en plek toe sy en Eric mekaar liefgehad het. En Josh is die een wat gaan boet as sy vir 'n egskending vra.

Sy draai by die kerk se parkeerterrein in, parkeer langs die gebou, en skakel die motor af. Sy bly 'n oomblik so sit en laat sak haar kop op die stuurwiel. Nee, sy kan nooit van Eric skei nie. Hy het niks verkeerds gedoen nie. Hy was nog nooit ontrou nie, het haar nog nooit geslaan of gevloek nie. Hy is selde onbeskof of onvriendelik.

Die bekende branding in haar oë vererger. Sy haal haar donkerbril af en toe sy dit argeloos op die sitplek langs haar laat val, drup 'n traan op haar broek en vorm 'n klein nat sirkeltjie op die denim. Sy het uitgesien na hierdie tydjie alleen, maar nie om in trane uit te bars nie. Daar is nie nou tyd vir huil nie. Die res van die komitee gaan oor vyf minute hier wees en maande se beplanning en insameling gaan in die volgende paar ure afgesluit word. Hulle harde werk sal dosyne kinders in Haïti van kos en medisyne en skoolvoorrade voorsien.

Wat is dan die probleem? Waarom voel dit asof haar wêreld besig is om ineen te stort, asof 'n deel van haar hart nooit weer gaan asemhaal nie?

Laura vee haar oë af en snuif twee keer. Sy weet wat dit is. Dit is nie wat Eric gedoen het wat haar ongelukkig maak nie, dis wat hy nie gedoen het nie. Dis

wat hy iewers oor die jare ophou doen het. Toe hy opgehou het om sy beloftes na te kom, toe hy opgehou het om haar uit te neem, om 'n paar minute aan Josh af te staan.

Tussen haar en Eric is daar kwalik meer as 'n funksionele sakeverhouding. Ontdaan van die liefde en passie wat haar droom vir hulle huwelik was, van die betowering wat hulle in hulle eerste paar jaar saam gedeel het. Maar dis nie rede genoeg vir 'n egskeding nie – nie naastenby nie.

Haar hande klem om die stuurwiel. *Here ... daar is nie uitkoms nie. Gee vir my iets, 'n teken, 'n rede om te glo dat dit eendag sal beter gaan.* Sy sit in 'n tronk van pretensie en beloftes, en tensy Eric tot inkeer kom, sal haar vonnis lewenslank wees. Want om hoof van Koppel & Grant te wees, sal nie vir Eric genoeg wees nie; ook nie om 'n miljoen dollar te maak nie. Daar sal altyd nog 'n transaksie, nog 'n vergadering, nog 'n korporatiewe rekening wees wat ingepalm moet word.

En daardie dinge sal voorkeur bo haar en Josh geniet.

Sy vee haar oë af en kyk op toe sy voetstappe hoor naderkom.

“Laura?”

Haar kop ruk op en sy kyk vas in Clay. Sy het hom nie sien aankom nie. “O, haai.” Sy gryp haastig na haar sonbril om haar rooi oë weg te steek. Sy kry dit reg om te glimlag. “Jy het my laat skrik.”

Clay leun nader en rus met sy voorarms op haar motor se dak. “Jy huil.”

“Nee.” Sy dwing 'n geforseerde laggie oor haar lippe. “Dit was net 'n lang dag.”

Hy hou sy kop skeef en kyk ondersoekend na haar. “Is jy seker?”

“Ja.” Sy snuif weer. “Wat maak jy hier?”

Clay knik oor sy skouer na die kerkgebou. “Ek moes goed vir hierdie week se Sondagskool kom haal.” Hy glimlag. “Die graadtwees begin hierdie Sondag met 'n nuwe module.” Hy aarsel. “Is jy hier vir die sendingvergadering?”

Laura knik. Sy is dankbaar vir die geleentheid om haar emosies onder beheer te kry. Clay ken haar heeltemal te goed om geflous te word. En die laaste ding wat sy wil hê, is dat Clay nou moet uitvind wat regtig in haar huwelik aangaan.

Clay staan terug en leun teen 'n bussie wat langs Laura s'n geparkeer is. “Is Eric nie veronderstel om ook hier te wees nie?”

“Hy kon nie die vergaderings maak nie; hy's te besig.”

“O.” Clay aarsel. “Wat van Josh?”

“Eric is by hom.” Sy forseer nog 'n glimlaggie. “Net hulle twee.”

“Dis goed.”

Laura trek haar asem stadig in. “Hoe was jou dag?”

“Daar was hierdie week nog nie een motorjaagtog nie.” Hy grinnik. “Dit moet 'n rekord wees.”

Laura se oë rus op haar hande. Sy het Clay laas by die pizzaplek gesien, en sy moet nog vir hom dankie sê. “Oor nou die aand ... ” Sy klim uit die motor, maak die deur toe en draai na Clay. “Dankie dat jy gekom het. Dit het baie vir

Josh beteken.”

“Eric moes daar gewees het.” Iets soos opstandigheid flits in Clay se oë. Hy hou Laura se blik ’n oomblik langer as wat nodig is. “Dit is ’n patroon, nè?”

Vir ’n oomblik het Laura die vreemde behoefte om Eric te beskerm. Hy is immers haar man en sy werkprogram was nog altyd so, lank voor Josh se geboorte. Maar sy kan dit nie doen nie. Clay is reg. Eric is eenvoudig nie betrokke nie, punt.

“Ja. Vir ’n rukkie al.” Sy kyk na haar voete. *Ek wil nie huil nie, God. Asseblief. Nie hier nie, nie nou nie.* “Hy en Josh ken mekaar skaars.”

“Hy’s ’n dwaas.” Clay byt op sy tande en laat sy asem uit. “Hy werk so hard dat hy nie weet wat hy misloop nie.”

Laura kyk na hom en probeer sy laaste sin peil. Sy wil vra wat hy presies bedoel, of hy oor haar of Josh praat. Maar sy weet van beter. Daar is sekere grense wat nie deur skoonfamilie oorgesteek word nie. Selfs al kom hulle al van skool af saam. Sy ontmoet Clay se oë. “Dit kon erger gewees het.”

“Ja.” Daar is skielik ’n dieper kyk in Clay se oë. “Eric is ’n goeie man, maar ... nou ja, dalk moet hy sy prioriteite ’n bietjie herrangskik.” Clay haal sy skouers op. “Hy moes by die partytjie gewees het.”

Sy knik, en dan is dit asof Clay besef dit is ’n moeilike gesprek vir haar.

Hy kyk op in die pienk en oranje lug bokant hulle. “Josh het dit geniet ... en dis al wat tel.”

’n Beeld verskyn voor Laura. Eric in ’n vergadering met sy kollegas by Koppel & Grant, besig om die voordele van verskeie aandele te vergelyk terwyl Clay by Chuck E. Cheese’s met Josh speel. Dit maak nie van Eric ’n slegte man nie. Daar is baie pa’s wat lang ure werk, en sy behoort dankbaar te wees dat Josh iemand soos Clay het. Maar in plaas van dankbaarheid, ervaar sy ’n bitter pyn oor die onmoontlike situasie waarin sy haar bevind.

Clay kyk soekend in haar oë. “Praat met hom, oukei?”

“Ek sal.”

Toe trek hy haar sonder ’n verdere woord nader en gee haar ’n drukkie, een soos die dosyne wat hulle mekaar al tevore gegee het, maar een wat Laura nou nodiger het as ooit. “Ek is hier vir jou, Laura. Vir al twee van julle. Moenie iets ondeurdag aanvang nie.”

Laura vee ’n verdwaalde traan onder haar bril af. “Ek sal nie.”

“Mooi.” Hy staan terug en gee haar wang ’n tikkie. “Julle is my twee gunstelingmense in die wêreld.”

Sy snuif en draai om om haar handsak uit die motor te haal. “Ek weet.”

“Kom.” Clay begin na die kerk toe aanstryk. “Alles sal uitwerk.”

Dis drie ure later toe Laura by hulle oprit indraai. Iets aan haar gesprek met Clay, sy optimisme, het ’n vlammetjie in haar hart laat ontspring. Dalk is dit nie te laat nie. Dalk kan hulle weer vir berading gaan en sal dinge hierdie keer regtig verander. As hulle mekaar eens op ’n tyd liefgehad het, sal God hulle tog op die een of ander manier na daardie plek toe kan terugneem.

Sy is op die punt om uit haar motor te klim, toe sy iets vreemds opmerk. Daar



is 'n motor in hulle oprit en Laura staan verward daarna. Dit is amper tienuur op 'n Vrydagaand. Wie sal so laat hier kuier? Sy gryp haar handsak en gaan haastig in. Josh is by die etenstafel besig om iets te skryf, en Jenna, die kinderoppasser, sit langs hom.

Laura steek in haar spore vas en probeer sin maak van die situasie. "Hallo, Jenna." Sy aarsel. "Ek het meneer Michaels hier verwag."

Die tiener glimlag en gee die uitveër vir Josh. "Die kantoor het gebel en gesê hy moet ingaan." Sy wys na 'n klompie folio's. Ek en Josh het sommer 'n bietjie tafels gedoen."

Laura sit haar goed neer en loop stadig eetkamer toe. Die oomblik toe sy Josh se rooi oë sien, weet sy. Eric het dit weer gedoen, weer 'n belofte gemaak en dit verbreek sonder om een maal te dink hoe Josh daardeur geraak sal word.

Laura se optimisme maak plek vir woede en sy byt op haar lip. Sy gaan nie voor Jenna oor hulle probleme praat nie. Laura haal haar beursie uit haar handsak. "Hoe laat het hy jou laat kom?"

"Net voor sewe." Jenna vryf Josh se hare deurmekaar en kyk veelbetekenend na Laura. "Hy het 'n moeilike aand gehad."

Net voor sewe? Laura kan Eric vermoor. Sy het kwart voor sewe kerk toe gery. Dit beteken dat sy nog nie eens tien minute weg was voordat hy Jenna gebel het en werk toe is nie. Laura moet haarself inhou. "Het hy gesê hoe laat hy gaan terug wees?"

"Eintlik," sê Jenna ongemaklik, "was hy nie meer hier toe ek aangekom het nie. Hy het gesê dit was 'n krisis."

"Jy bedoel ... " Laura se hart mis 'n slag en begin dan onreëlmatig klop. "Hy het Josh alleen hier gelos?"

"Net vir 'n paar minute ... Ek het vir hom gesê dat ek dadelik sou kom en hy het 'n video vir Josh ingesit." Jenna rig haar volgende sin aan die kind. "Jy het baie soet sit en kyk toe ek hier aankom, nè, Josh?"

Josh knik en gee Laura 'n kyk wat uit 'n mengsel van woede en 'n onuitspreeklike hartseer bestaan. Laura glimlag flou vir hom. "Ons sal nou-nou praat, goed?"

Laura wys Jenna moet haar volg en hulle loop na die voordeur toe. Laura sug toe hulle alleen in die portaal is. "Het Josh gehuil toe jy hier kom?"

Jenna praat in 'n gedempte stem. "Hy was in tranes." Sy frons. "Die arme outjie. Dit het my 'n halfuur geneem om hom te kalmeer."

Laura se bloed bereik kookpunt. Nadat sy Jenna betaal het, staan en staan sy na die teëlvloer in die portaal. Sy is so verskriklik kwaad dat sy nie kan beweeg nie. Hoe durf Eric dit doen? Na wat op Josh se verjaarsdag gebeur het ... en op die vooraand van sy besoek aan New York? Haar woede grens aan waansin. Dalk moet sy na Koppel & Grant se kantore toe ry om vir Eric te sê dat sy genoeg gehad het. 'n Tydelike skeiding is die enigste manier om 'n einde aan die skade te maak wat Josh aangedoen word.

Maar dis nie moontlik nie, nie nou nie. Nie met Josh wat verslane en gebroke in die vertrek langsaan sit nie.

Sy laat haar asem stadig uit. *Here ... help my deur hierdie ding. Hoe kan ek Eric tegelykertyd liefhê en haat?* Josh is steeds by die tafel toe sy terugloop. “Josh?” Sy gaan sit woordeloos langs hom en neem sy hande in hare. “Wat het Pappa vir jou gesê?”

Groot trane verskyn in sy oë toe hy sy een skouer skaars waarneembaar lig. “Daar was ’n spesiale vergadering. ’n Krisis.” Josh snuif en vee met die agterkant van sy hand oor sy wange. Sy besef dat hy voor haar sterk wil wees. Die hartseer, die teleurstelling is eenvoudig te groot. “Hy het gesê dat hy daarvoor sou opmaak as hy van New York af terugkom.”

“Nou ja ... ” Laura kners op haar tande. Dis wat Eric altyd sê. “Hy is ekstra besig voordat hy weggaan, Josh.” Die woorde is net ter wille van Josh. Sodat die kind nie sy pa sal haat nie. “Ek’s seker hy wou bly.”

“Partykeer dink ek ... ” Josh se gesiggie vertrek en ’n snik kom van diep uit sy binneste. “Partykeer voel dit asof hy nie eens van my hou nie, Mamma.”

“Josh!” Sy trek die seuntjie teen haar vas en vervloek Eric vir alles wat hy nooit vir sy kind was nie. “Dit is nie waar nie. Jou pa is ’n baie besige man. Net omdat hy nie baie by die huis is nie, beteken dit nie dat hy nie van jou hou nie.” Sy vryf oor sy rug en voel hoe sy klein lyfie ruk toe hy weer begin snik. “Hy is lief vir jou, my skat. Regtig.”

“As ... as hy vir my lief is, hoekom was hy nie by my partytjie nie?” Josh haal drie keer vinnig asem. “En hoekom het hy my vanaand alleen by die huis gelos?”

Laura se hart klop swaar. Sy het nie antwoorde vir haar kind nie. Sy wil vir hom sê dat hy sy pa verkeerd verstaan, dat die man nie altyd so was nie, en dat dinge volgende week weer normaal sal wees. Maar vandat sy kan onthou, was hierdie aanhoudende misloop van geleenthede en leë beloftes ’n normale deel van hulle lewe.

“Volgende naweek ... ” Sy bedink haar. Wat van volgende naweek? Sal Eric enigsins onthou dat hy belowe het om Josh strand toe te neem, om vir hom ’n lyfplank te koop en heeldag op die strand met hom deur te bring? Hoekom sou hy? Die besoek aan New York sal vanselfsprekend deur ’n magdom vergaderings opgevolg word. En die een of ander kliënt se aandeelprestasie sal nog ’n krisis by Koppel & Grant tot gevolg hê. Dit gebeur elke keer. Hy wat Eric is, het dalk nog die vermetelheid om beloftes te maak aan Jake, maar Laura kan haarself nie sover bring om hulle te herhaal nie.

Haar seuntjie kyk vraend na haar, sy oë rooi en geswel. “Wat van volgende naweek?”

Laura laat hom gaan en sit terug. “Ek het gedink ons kan strand toe gaan.”

“Weet Ma wat?” Josh trek sy been op en hou sy knie teen sy bors vas. “Ek hou nie van die strand nie. Ek wil ’n basketbal hê sodat Pa my parkie toe kan vat om doele te skiet. Soos die ander pa’s.”

Josh het die afgelope somer ’n paar maal saam met sy maatjies en hulle pa’s, een keer selfs saam met Clay, park toe gegaan. Die gimnasium is die hele Saterdag oop en die plaaslike pa’s en seuns het die plek as’t ware

geannekseer. Josh het dit minstens drie keer aan Eric genoem, maar as Eric nie voor sy rekenaar was of 'n lys dokumente deurgegaan het nie, moes hy iemand bel. Hy het Josh elke keer met 'n gebaar weggewys en vinnig geknik. "Definitief, seun ... ons maak so. Ek sal jou 'n ander keer vat om te gaan doele skiet."

Maar dit het nooit gebeur nie.

Na nog 'n minuut of wat kom Josh tot bedaring. Hy droog sy gesig weer af, staan op en soen Laura. "Ek gaan slaap. Sê vir Pa ek sien hom volgende week."

"Ek is lief vir jou, Josh."

"Ek ook." Na 'n paar treë steek hy vas en draai om. "Ek wens oom Clay was my pa. Dit sou wonderlik wees."

Laura se laaste bietjie weerstand verkrummel. "Ek's jammer, Josh."

"Dis oukei." Sy skouers hang en sy ken raak amper aan sy bors toe hy wegloop. "Nag, Mamma."

Sy luister hoe hy met die trap opgaan en na sy kamer toe loop. Toe die deur toegaan, tel sy die koordlose foon op en skakel Eric se kantoor nommer. 'n Jong vrou antwoord na die derde lui.

"Hallo?" Haar stem is opgeruimd.

Laura wil gil. "Eric Michaels, asseblief."

"Eric ... kom ek kyk." Sy hou haar hand oor die foon en haar stem is gedemp.

"Kan iemand vir Eric gaan sê daar is 'n oproep vir hom."

*Eric?* Wie is hierdie meisie en wat maak sy ná tien op 'n Vrydagaand op kantoor?

'n Minuut later tel Eric die foon op. "Hallo?"

"Jy het Josh *alleen* by die huis gelos?" Haar stem is 'n gespanne kruising tussen skok en beheerste woede.

"Laura, kom ek verduidelik." Hy bly net 'n oomblik te lank stil.

"Nee." Sy's briesend. "Jy is te laat. Jou seun is in trane bed toe, Eric."

"Ek het nie jou beskuldigings nodig nie, Laura. Ek voel sleg genoeg."

"O, dit klink so." Haar stem styg. "Wat kan so belangrik wees dat jy jou seuntjie op sy eie los, Eric? Wat?"

"'n Telefoonkonferensie met New York, dis wat." Hy aarsel. "Die oomblik toe jy weg is, het Murphy gebel en gevra waar ek is. Die oproep was vir halfagt gereël."

"Dit beteken dit was halfelf in New York." Laura gee 'n kort laggie. "Selfs iemand soos Allen kan nie sulke ure werk nie."

"Wat is dit veronderstel om te beteken?"

"Dit beteken die stories is besig om oud te raak." Sy loop woonkamer toe en gaan sit met die foon op die punt van die leerstoel. "Wie het die telefoon geantwoord?"

"Hier?"

"Ja, daar. Wie dit ook al is, sy noem jou op jou voornaam. Is dit nie 'n bietjie familiêr vir 'n sekretaresse nie?"

“Haar naam is Vicky. Sy is nie ’n sekretaresse nie. Sy’s Murphy se assistent en sy is gelukkig getroud. Niemand van ons is formeel met die assistente nie.” Sy stem is neerbuigend. “Beantwoord dit jou vraag?”

“Kyk, Eric ... ” Die gesprek is nêrens heen op pad nie. “Ek gee nie om of president Bush jou bel nie, Murphy kon die telefoonkonferensie hanteer het.” Sy blaas haar asem uit. “Josh het jou vanaand nodig gehad. Dit het Jenna ’n halfuur geneem om hom tot bedaring te bring.”

“Dis belaglik. Hy is oud genoeg om ... ” Eric bedink homself en aarsel. “Ek en Jenna het verby mekaar gery toe ek uit is. Hy was nie drie minute lank alleen nie, Laura.”

“Nou goed, julle het julle konferensie gehou. Jy kon huis toe gekom het.”

“’n Paar goed het voorgeval.” Hy sug diep. “Jy weet hoe dit voor so ’n besoek gaan. Moenie nou ’n hele storie hiervan maak nie, Laura, asseblief.”

Skielik kan sy Clay se arms om haar voel, hom hoor sê dat sy niks ondeurdag moet doen nie, en dat alles gaan regkom. Maar Clay is verkeerd. Alles is verkeerd. Wat is besig om met haar te gebeur? Wanneer laas het sy Bybel geleses of oor haar verhouding met Eric gebid? Alles wat saak maak, is besig om soos ’n halfgebreide trui uit te rafel, en sy het nie ’n idee hoe om dit te keer nie.

Erger nog, sy wil dit nie keer nie.

Toe sy weer praat, is die baklei weg uit haar stem. “Ek gaan nou slaap, Eric. Ons sal moet praat as jy terug is van New York.”

“Praat?” Vir die eerste keer die aand hoor sy iets soos vrees in sy woorde. “Moenie oorreegeer nie, Laura. Jy weet hoe besig ek die laaste tyd was.”

“Ja, ek weet. Josh ook.” Sy sluit haar oë. “Dis waarom ons moet praat.” Haar stem breek, maar sy doen haar bes om gelykmatig verder te praat. “Ons kan nie so aangaan nie, Eric. Ek kan nie.”

Na ’n oomblik se stilte kan sy Eric moeg hoor sug. “Jy is reg. Ek kom Donderdagmiddag vroeg terug.” Sy stem is skielik teer. “Ek sal reguit soontoe kom en jou uitneem vir ete. Ek belowe, Laura ... dit sal rustiger gaan. Ek sal jou en Josh daarvoor vergoed. Gee my ’n kans.”

Normaalweg laat Eric se beloftes haar vermurwe, selfs al loop dit dikwels op niks uit nie. Maar vanaand is sy te moeg, te seergemaak om om te gee. “Nag, Eric.”

Hy aarsel. “Hou Donderdagaand oop, oukei?”

“Ons sal sien. Ek moet gaan.”

Hulle lui af sonder om te sê dat hulle mekaar liefhet of mekaar sal mis. Laura plaas die foon terug op sy plek teen die muur en probeer onthou wanneer laas Eric vir haar gesê het dat hy haar liefhet. Twee maande gelede? Drie? Is dit die man wat veronderstel was om haar uit ’n verlede van hartseer en verwerping te red? Die man wat sy gedink het saam met haar van ’n sprokieslewe droom?

En wat van Josh? Eric het nog nooit vir die seuntjie gesê dat hy vir hom lief is nie. Selfs nie nadat sy Eric daaroor gekonfronteer het toe Josh vier was nie.

Nie een enkele keer nie.

“Jy is lief vir hom, of hoe?” Hulle was besig om klaar te eet en Josh het buite gaan speel.

“Josh?” Eric het verbaas gelyk. “Natuurlik.”

“Sê dit dan vir hom. ’n Seun moet dit by sy pa hoor.”

Eric het haar met ’n handgebaar afgemaak. “Dis belaglik. My pa het dit nooit vir my gesê nie.”

“Jou pa was nie ’n Christen nie.”

“Dalk is ek ook nie.” Toe die woorde uit is, het sy gesig verstar. “Ek ... ek het dit nie bedoel nie.”

Maar hy hét dit bedoel. Sedert die doodgeboorte van hulle klein dogtertjie ’n paar jaar na hulle troue, het Eric nie weer saam met haar kerk toe gegaan nie. Aanvanklik het Laura gedink dat sy oneindig swaarder deur die verlies getref is. Totdat sy een middag by hulle klein woonstel aangekom het. Hy was in die babakamer en het in die wiegstoel gesit wat hulle by ’n rommelverkoop ingekoop het.

Dit was die enigste keer dat sy hom ooit sien huil het.

“Hoekom, Laura?” Hy was gebroke, sonder ’n teken van sy gewone selfvertroue. “Hoekom het die Here haar gevat?”

“Hy het haar nie gevat nie.” Laura het tussen sy bene gekniel en albei sy hande in hare geneem in ’n poging om hom te help verstaan. “Dis net een van daardie dinge wat ’n mens nie verstaan nie.”

“Nee.” Hy het sy oë toegeknyp. “Dis omdat ek nog studeer het en God ons nie gehelp het nie en ons nie ordentlike mediese sorg kon bekostig nie. Anders sou sy nog gelewe het.”

In sommige opsigte was Eric reg. ’n Verpleegster by die hospitaal het vir hulle gesê dat hulle baba se dood voorkom kon word. As hulle ’n sonar laat doen het, sou hulle op haar kon werk voordat sy gebore is. Maar sonder ’n mediese fonds was die toets buite die kwessie.

Selfs nou – soveel jaar later – sien Laura daardie tyd in hulle lewe as ’n skeidslyn. Voor daardie tyd het Eric ’n rotsvaste geloof gehad. Solied en onbeweeglik. Maar daardie aand het sy hart hard geword. Kort daarna het hy nie meer kerk toe gegaan het, het hy opgehou om oor God se wil te praat of Skrifgedeeltes aan te haal.

Laura het by verskeie geleenthede met hom daaroor gepraat. “Dit gaan oor die baba, nè?” Hy sou net sy kop skud en kort, saaklike antwoorde gee. “Die baba was nie bestem om te wees nie.”

“Nou hoekom dan, Eric? Wat het gebeur?”

Toe sy hom op ’n keer vra, het hy in haar oë gekyk en ’n oomblik gewag. “Ons het daardie klein dogtertjie verloor omdat ek jou nie die beste kon gee nie.” Hy het op sy tande gebyt. “In hierdie lewe moet ’n mens jou eie pad oopveg. En glo my, Laura ... ek gaan dit nie aan die Here oorlaat nie. As ek eers begin geld maak, sal jy jou nooit weer oor mediese sorg hoef te bekommer nie.”

Eric het sy belofte nagekom. Met Josh se geboorte kon hulle die beste mediese plan en die beste dokters in Suid-Kalifornië bekostig. Maar iewers langs die pad het hy 'n gedrewe sakeman geword wat nie sy gesin se oortuigings deel nie en homself nie sover kan kry om vir sy seuntjie te sê dat hy vir hom lief is nie.

Nadat Laura haar nagrok aangetrek het, kruip sy tussen die koel lakens in. Eric sal tot in die oggendure besig wees om te pak en die laaste details van sy besoek na te gaan. Hy sal ongetwyfeld in die gastekamer slaap; dus sal hulle eers Donderdag weer praat.

Terwyl sy wegraak, probeer sy haarself jammer kry, maar sy kan nie. Haar huwelik is besig om dood te gaan, en sy en Eric is albei skuldig. Ja, dis moeilik om hom lief te hê. Maar hoe hard het sy probeer? Hoekom het sy nie gepraat toe hy die eerste keer in die gastekamer gaan slaap het nie? En hoeveel jaar gelede het sy hom met 'n naweekuitstappie of 'n spesiale aandjie uit verras?

Wat staan daar nou weer in die Bybel? Dat dit die klein jakkalsies is wat die wingerd vernietig? Hoeveel klein jakkalsies het sy sedert Josh se geboorte toegelaat? Laura draai om. Daar is net een herinnering wat te midde van die verlore geleenthede uitstaan.

Die herinnering aan 'n vervloë gister toe Eric Michaels nie kon wag om ná klas huis toe te kom om by haar te wees nie. Eens op 'n tyd, 'n leeftyd gelede, het hulle mekaar intiem liefgehad. Maar deur die jare het die takke van hulle liefde winterkaal geword.

En dit voel nie asof dit ooit weer gaan lente word nie.

# Chapter FIVE

SEPTEMBER 9, 2001

Sierra looked like a princess.

Jake gave a low, appreciative whistle and leaned against the hallway wall. "My goodness." He grinned at her. "I bet you're the most beautiful girl in all of New York City."

Her eyes sparkled. "Really, Daddy?" She did a twirl, and her pink and white skirt fluffed out around her knees. "Mommy bought this for me so I'd have a pretty church dress."

"You found the perfect one." He played with a strand of her hair. "Curlies today?"

"Yes, please." She batted her eyelashes at him. "Susie's daddy never curls her hair."

"Susie?" Jake crouched down so he was eye level with Sierra. "From Sunday school?"

"Yep. Her mommy lives in New Jersey, so her daddy brings her." Sierra brushed her nose up against his. "Just like me and you!"

"I see." Jake gave a slow, thoughtful nod. "But he doesn't curl her hair, is that right?"

"Right!"

Jake puffed his chest up and planted his fists at his waist. "Then that makes me Super-Daddy."

"And Mommy's Super-Mommy." She giggled. "Know why?"

Jake felt his heart melt, the same way it always did in the presence of his small daughter. "Why, sweetheart?"

"Because," she held her chin a bit higher, "Mommy bought me a church dress. Susie's mommy didn't do that."

"Well ... then you're right. Mommy is Super-Mommy."

Sierra leaned close, placing her nose up against his. "Butterfly

kisses?"

"For my best girl!" He rubbed his nose against hers, then turned his face and blinked in time with her so that their lashes brushed up against each other three times. Butterfly kisses were part of their morning routine. He stood up and caught another strand of her hair. "Go play in your room. I'll call you when I'm ready to curl, okay?"

She clasped her hands, her blue eyes wide and innocent. "Horsie ride?"

She could have asked him for the moon, and he'd have broken his neck to get it. Something about her sweet spirit and fresh-faced beauty had that effect on him. He had no idea how he'd survive her wedding. "Okay, pumpkin pie ..." He turned around and bent over. "Hop aboard."

Sierra's giggle rang out again, her laughter playing across his soul like music from a favorite song. She climbed onto Jake's back and gave him a gentle tap with her heels. "Giddyap!"

Jake reared his head back and made a few realistic snorting sounds. "Where to, Princess Sierra?" He used a deep voice, the one he always used when he was the horse and Sierra the rider.

"To my palace!" She patted his head. "You should grow your hair long, Daddy. Horsies are 'posed to have long hair."

"Sorry." Jake whinnied and began galloping down the hallway toward Sierra's room. "This horsie has to keep his hair short, princess."

"That's okay, horsie," she said, then leaned close and kissed the back of his head. "I still love you."

Jake rounded the corner and pulled up sharp next to Sierra's bed. "Your palace, dear princess."

Sierra slid down and did her best impression of a royal curtsy. "Thank you." She patted Jake's head once more. "Do you like my pretty dress, horsie?"

Leaping and pawing the air like a wild stallion, Jake gave three exaggerated nods of his head. "Who made you so pretty, Princess Sierra?"



The princess persona faded. Sierra tilted her face, brought her lips together, and gave him a guileless smile. “Jesus did.” Her voice fell to a whisper. “I’m gonna read my Bible book, Daddy. See you in a few minutes.”

Jake pranced around in a small circle, then back down the hall toward his and Jamie’s bedroom. He took his shower, dressed, and found his razor in the cupboard beneath the bathroom sink. As he shaved, a sadness settled in his gut. Why couldn’t Jamie miss her painting class and come with them? Just once?

He ran the blade over the angles of his face. *God ... how long will this go on? How long until she sees the light and wants what Sierra and I have?*

*Remember, my son, I began a good work in her, and I’ll be faithful to see it through.*

Jake froze, his razor poised beneath his right cheekbone. He’d felt similar nudges almost daily in the past month. Responses from somewhere inside him, all with a similar message so clear it was almost audible. And the silent whispers in his soul always brought about the same memory. He and Jamie at the Young Life high school summer camp the summer after he graduated. Jake couldn’t exactly remember what they’d learned that week, but whatever it was, Jamie had felt it.

Felt it all the way to her soul.

When the camp leaders asked people to come forward if they wanted to live for Jesus, Jamie was one of the first campers on her feet.

Before they came home, she explained her feelings to Jake. “For the first time life means something. Like I don’t have to worry that something bad’s going to happen. Because God has it all figured out.”

Jake had been certain that Jamie’s decision would be life-changing. His own decision—made back when he was eight years old—certainly had been. Instead, she had questions from the beginning. Questions and doubts and an immediate return to the aversion she’d always had regarding faith

and church and God in general. A few years later, her skepticism had been fueled by her parents' tragic deaths.

And by every firefighter funeral since.

For Jamie, a huge chasm lay between belief and unbelief, and there was simply no bridge great enough to span the gap. No bridge except God Himself. And as time went on, Jamie wanted less and less to do with God.

This, then, had become the crux of Jake's prayers for his wife. That God make good on the promise that constantly echoed in his mind. That He might complete in Jamie that faith that began two decades ago at summer camp. Jake moved the razor down his chin. And every time he prayed for her, he'd been given a reassurance, a knowing, that felt heaven-sent. No doubt about it. Not only had God *heard* his prayers for Jamie, He was going to answer them.

Soon.

It was this knowing that convinced Jake he and God had a deal going. That Jake wasn't going anywhere, that his body wouldn't be the next one paraded in front of five thousand uniformed firefighters. Not when God was on the brink of using him to turn Jamie's lifelong doubts into the sweetest devotion.

She was already changing. After all, she'd cared enough to buy Sierra a new dress. Jake straightened and examined his face for missed spots. Yes, Jamie cared. Just not enough to come to church with them. She'd left an hour earlier for breakfast and tole painting with a few of the firefighter wives. Twice a month on Sundays they met, giving her an excuse for two out of every four Sundays. The other two were family days, Jamie had decided. Time to hike or bike or play with the jet ski.

"God can't expect you to spend every weekend in church, can He?" She'd joked with Jake about the subject a dozen times. But the bottom line was clearer than the sky above the city this past week. Jamie didn't want to go. And she didn't want anything to do with God.

Still, she'd bought Sierra a church dress.

That was better than the way she'd reacted a year ago when Jake started taking their daughter to church. He could still hear the frustration in her voice when they first discussed the issue.

"It's not right to fill her head with fairy tales," she had lowered her voice to a whisper so Sierra couldn't hear her. "She doesn't need make-believe stuff about a God who"—she waved her hands—"who might not exist."

Jake had stayed calm, his voice as quiet as hers. "What would it hurt? She'll draw pictures and sing songs and learn how to pray." He took gentle hold of her shoulders. "Is that so bad, Jamie?"

"Yes." She stepped backwards and planted her hands on her hips. "It'll only disappoint her if something bad happens and ... and God turns out to be just another fantasy."

"What if He isn't?" Jake had kept his distance, allowing her the space to process what he was saying. "What if God's real, Jamie. Do you really want to keep Sierra from knowing about Him? Just two Sundays a month?"

In the end Jamie had agreed—on one condition. "Don't bug me about it, Jake. I'll find something else to do those Sundays, but leave me out of it."

Her words still stung, but she'd come a long way since then. For the past few months she would ask Sierra about Sunday school and listen while their daughter repeated her Bible story. Twice in the past month she'd even said she might attend Christmas service with them this year.

And now the pretty new dress.

Jake plugged in the curling iron and caught a glimpse of his simple gold wedding band. He loved her more than words could ever describe. Yes, Jamie's day of reckoning with God was coming. If his sense of the Lord's timing was right, it was coming soon. He slipped into a pair of new jeans and a pullover shirt.

"Sierra!" He leaned toward his open bedroom door. "Beauty parlor's open."

“Goody!” She came running, all giggles and bouncing thick blonde hair. He never tired of her, never stopped marveling at the wonder of her life. She was only one day old when she first gripped his fingers, and he hers. In the days since, he’d yet to let go.

She wrapped her arms around his legs and hugged him. “I thought you’d never open.”

Jake patted her head. “We beauticians have to shave every now and then, you know.”

Sierra came to him and framed his jaw with her little-girl hands. “Mmmm. Nice and smooth. Mommy likes it that way.”

“That’s what matters.” Jake grinned.

“Yep.” Sierra nodded. “Mommy says she likes her men clean and shaken.”

A chuckle simmered in his belly, but he stifled it. “You mean clean shaven?”

She thought for a moment. “Yep, that’s it.”

“Okay, young lady, turn around.” Sierra did as she was told and faced the mirror. Jake took the curling iron and expertly wrapped it around an inch-wide section of her hair. He caught Sierra watching him in the mirror. Her smile faded some, and her mood seemed more somber than before. He held the curl in place. “What’s wrong, sweetie?”

A small frown creased her brow. “I think we should pray for Mommy.”

“Okay.” Jake released the curling iron, and a single ringlet cascaded down Sierra’s back. “How come?”

“Because, when Mommy bought me my pretty dress, she asked me about church.”

“She did?” Hope grabbed hold of Jake’s heart as he sectioned out another piece of Sierra’s hair. “What’d she say?”

“She asked me if it was fun, and I told her yes. It was the funnest thing in the world.” Sierra was careful to hold still. “Then she told me a

secret. Just between me and her.”

“Really?” A secret? Jake tried not to seem too anxious as he slid the curling iron from Sierra's hair and watched a second ringlet fall alongside the first. “Can you tell me?”

Sierra gave a dainty shrug. “I guess so.”

“Okay then ...” Jake gathered another section of Sierra's hair. “What did she tell you?”

“Well ...” Their eyes met in the mirror again, and Sierra's looked deeper, wiser than her years. “She said sometimes she wishes she could go to church with us.”

“Really?” Jake swallowed and released another curl. He forced a light tone. “Then why doesn't she go?”

“Because she isn't ready yet.” Sierra bit her lip. “That's why we need to pray for her. So she'll get ready.”

Jake nodded. For a while he was quiet as he finished with Sierra's hair. Then he unplugged the curling iron and led Sierra to a chair near the foot of his bed. “C'mere, honey.” He sat down and pulled Sierra onto his lap. “Let's pray for Mommy now, okay? Then we can pray for her again at church.”

“Okay.” Sierra smiled at him and brushed her nose against his. Then she grew serious and closed her eyes, bowing her head just a bit. Jake closed his eyes too and listened. “Dear God.” Sierra's voice was small but strong. “Me and Daddy get ready for church really fast. But it takes Mommy a long, long time.” She hesitated. “Please help Mommy get ready very soon. So we can all go to church ... like a family.”

Her last words caught on Jake's heart and hung there for a moment. He hugged Sierra and waited for the lump in his throat to go down. When it did, he kissed her cheek. “Good job, honey.” He slid her to her feet, stood, and took hold of her hand. “I bet God's working on that one right now.”

Sierra studied the sections of her hair that fell over the front of her shoulders. “It's not curly enough, Daddy.”

“Well, it'll have to do. We'll be late if we do more.”

“Okay.” She did a little huff and squinted at him. “Do the curlies in the back being enough?” She took a few steps in front of him and looked up so that her hair fell nearly to her waist.

“Oh yes ... they're the boingy-est curlies I've ever seen.” Jake caught up with her again. “Let's go ... Don't wanna be late for the opening song.”

They walked down the stairs, and as they rounded the corner, Sierra stopped. “We have to swing hands, Daddy. Remember? We always swing hands.”

“That's right!” Jake opened his eyes wide, playing with her. “I almost forgot.”

Sierra giggled, and the rest of the way to the garage the two of them swung their joined hands. When they climbed inside Jake's truck, Sierra met his eyes and grinned. “‘Jesus Loves Me,’ right?”

“Right!”

Then, as they did every time they went to church together, they launched into a version of the song that would make a choir director cringe. But one Jake knew he would never forget.

Not if he lived a hundred years.

Sierra was tired when they got home from church, and Jake cuddled with her on the living room sofa until she fell asleep. Then he took her up to her room, crept back down, and called his father. It was something he tried to do every Sunday.

“Hello?”

“Dad ... it's Jake.”

“Well, hey there!” His father sounded strong and bursting with life, the way he always sounded. “How was church?”

“Good. Sierra wore a new dress, and she colored a picture of Moses.” Jake crossed the living room and settled in an old recliner. Brownie, their lab, trailed behind him and dropped in a heap near his feet. “She prayed for Jamie today.”

“Really?” There was a hint of concern in his tone. “Everything okay?”

“Yes. She prayed Jamie would be ready to come to church one of these days.”

A moment passed before Jake's father spoke. “One of these days I believe she will. She's like a frightened bird, in some ways, isn't she?”

“Yes.” Jake smiled. “Afraid to stick her head too far out of the nest.”

“Afraid she'll fall, when really ... if she'd only give it a go, she'd fly. Just like the rest of us.”

Jake tried to picture that—his whole family flying together in faith. “It'll happen.”

“Yep.”

Jake heard his father draw a slow breath and could almost see him sitting at one of the kitchen barstools, phone cord stretched across the counter as he gazed out across his ranch. His words held the relaxed tone of someone at peace with God.

“How's work?”

“Good. Had another funeral last weekend.”

“Hmmm. Sorry to hear it, son. Anyone I know?”

“Nope. He was a proby, a young guy, dropped dead of a heart attack working the hose reel.”

“Lot of heart attacks this year.”

“Four.”

“That kind of thing keeps the chaplain busy. Funerals were always tough back when I did it. Some years were bad. Twenty, thirty men lost in a handful of fatal fires. Not usually so many heart attacks.”

“Makes Jamie worry about my health.”

“Ah, you're fine.” Jim Bryan had been one of the toughest firefighters FDNY ever had. But his voice conveyed a mixture of deep faith and gentleness. Jim gave a sad chuckle. “Besides, not one of us goes home until God makes the call.”

Jake leaned back in the chair. "How's the horses?"

"Anxious for fall. Summer's been hot."

"The jet ski got a lot of use, that's for sure."

An easy quiet filled the lines for a moment. "When are you coming up?"

"Maybe next weekend. Jamie wants to get out of the city for a few days."

"I'd love to have you. We could ride all morning and later on whip up our famous barbecue chicken and salsa."

"Don't forget football."

"That's right. Starts Monday night, doesn't it?"

"At Denver."

"Okay, let's plan on Saturday morning."

"I'll let you know if anything changes." The front door opened and Jamie walked in. Their eyes met and they shared a smile. "Hey, Dad, gotta go. Thanks for the chat."

"Let me know about the weekend."

"Okay." Jake stood and headed back to the kitchen. "I love you, Dad. Take care of yourself."

"Love you too."

Jake hung up the phone and leaned against the counter. His eyes found Jamie's once more. "Hi."

"Hi." She came toward him, one hand hidden behind her back. Her face was tanned from their time on the water Friday, and she looked as beautiful as she had the day he married her. "How was church?"

"Good." He leaned sideways and tried to sneak a look at what she had in her hand. She shifted her body so he couldn't see, and his eyes met hers again. "Sierra drew a picture of Moses."

"Very nice. Never too many pictures of Moses." Jamie raised her eyebrows appreciatively, a teasing smile turning the corners of her mouth.

Jake didn't have to see what was behind her back to know Jamie was



up to something. She came closer until their toes were touching.

“I have something for you.”

“Really?” Jake made a subtle move for whatever was behind Jamie's back, but she took a step back and lowered her chin, her eyes big and flirty.

“Now, now. You can't peek.”

Jake thought about making another grab for the gift. He loved times like this, when he and Jamie could play. “Okay.” He closed his eyes and held out one hand. Almost instantly, he felt her place something cold there.

“Can I open?”

“Yes, silly.” A lighthearted laugh came from her. “You can open.”

He did, and there in his hand was a painted six-inch ceramic figurine of a firefighter with a guardian angel poised just behind him. The details were intricate and carefully painted. No wonder she was later than usual.

“Jamie ... it's beautiful. Did you paint it?”

Their eye contact held for another beat, and she stared at him, clearly enjoying his reaction. “The little guy kinda looked like you.” She grinned. “So I gave him your dark hair and blue eyes.”

“And there's my angel, right over my shoulder, looking out for me.”

“Yep. Let's put it where I can see it, okay?”

Jake slipped his hand along the base of her neck and wove his fingers into her hair. “Thank you.” He brought her face to his and kissed her. Then he pulled away from her and took a few steps toward the kitchen sink. The small shelves on either side were part of the cupboards, the place where Jamie kept knickknacks they'd gathered over the years.

He set the painted statue on the lowest shelf to the right of the sink. “There.” He stepped back. “That way we can see it whenever we're in the kitchen.”

Jamie tucked herself against Jake, just beneath his arm. She studied the figurine again. “Do you think it's true?”

“What?” Jamie wore a white tank top, and Jake ran his fingers along her bare arm.

“The guardian angel part.” Jamie lifted her eyes to his. “Do you think it's possible?”

“Of course.” Jake smiled at her and kissed her forehead this time. “I don't go out the door without an angel bigger than that hanging right beside me.”

“I hope you're right.” A fine layer of tears gathered in Jamie's eyes. “Because I've kinda kept a secret from you.”

“A secret?” Was she going to tell him the thing about wanting to go to church, about almost being ready, the story Sierra shared with him that morning? He let his eyes take in everything about her. “What secret?”

“The secret that I need you, Jake Bryan.” Her voice fell to a choked whisper. “I couldn't bear it if something happened to you.”

“Ahh, Jamie.” Jake wrapped his other arm around her and pulled her into a hug. She was always like this after a firefighter funeral. But for some reason, the one last week seemed to bother her more than the others. “Nothing's going to happen to me, honey.”

“It better not.” She muttered the words against his neck. Her tears fell on his shoulder and left a wet area on his pullover.

“It won't.” He drew back and kissed her, more slowly this time. “I promise.”

They stayed that way awhile, Jake kissing her, savoring the feel of her in his arms and believing with all his heart that the words he'd told her were true. Sure, fighting fires in New York City was dangerous. But for that matter, so was driving and walking and breathing. No bad thing was headed Jake's way, he was sure of it.

After all, he and God had a deal.

**Vyf**

9 September 2001

Sierra lyk soos 'n prinsessie.

Jake gee 'n diep, waarderende fluit waar hy teen die gangmuur staan. “My

genade.” Hy glimlag vir haar. “Ek wed jou jy is die heel mooiste dogtertjie in die hele New York.”

Haar oë glinster. “Rêrig, Pappa?” Sy draai in die rondte en haar pienk-en-wit rompie waaier om haar knieë. “Mamma het hierdie rokkie spesiaal gekoop vir kerk toe gaan.”

“Julle het die mooiste een gekry.” Hy speel met ’n lok van haar hare. “Gaan ons jou hare indraai?”

“Ja!” Sy fladder haar wimpers. “Susie se pa krul nooit haar hare nie.”

“Susie?” Jake hurk sodat hy Sierra reguit in die oë kan kyk. “Is sy in jou Sondagskoolklas?”

“Ja. Sy kom saam met haar pappa, want haar mamma bly in New Jersey.” Sierra vryf met haar neusie teen syne. “Net soos ek en Pappa.”

“Ek sien.” Jake knik nadenkend. “Maar jy sê hy draai nie haar hare in nie?”

“Nee.”

Jake stoot sy bors uit en plant sy vuiste in sy sy. “Dan maak dit my seker Super-Pappa.”

“En Mamma is Super-Mamma.” Sy giggel.

Jake voel hoe sy hart vermurwe. “Hoekom, my skat?”

“Want,” sy lig haar ken effens, “Mamma het vir my ’n kerk-rok gekoop. Susie se mamma het nie vir haar een gekoop nie.”

“Dan is jy reg. Mamma is Super-Mamma.”

Sierra leun nader en raak met haar neus aan syne. “Vlindersoentjie?”

“Vir my liefste dogtertjie?” Hy vryf met sy neus teen hare, draai sy gesig en knip sy oë sodat hulle wimpers mekaar kielie. Vlindersoentjies is deel van hulle oggendroetine. Hy staan op en vryf oor haar kop. “Gaan speel jy solank in jou kamer. Ek sal jou roep wanneer ek gereed is.”

Sy slaan haar hande saam, haar blou oë groot en onskuldig. “Perdjiery?”

Sy kan hom die maan en die sterre vra, en hy sal dit vir haar gee. Iets aan haar sagte hart en kinderlike skoonheid het daardie uitwerking op hom. Hy het geen idee hoe hy haar troue gaan oorleef nie. “Nou goed, patat ...” Hy draai om en hurk. “Spring op.”

Sierra se laggie rinkel soos ’n gunstelingwysie deur sy hart. Sy klim op Jake se rug en pomp hom liggies met haar hakke. “Galop!”

Jake gooi sy kop terug en maak ’n paar realistiese snorkgeluide. “Waarnatoe, prinses Sierra?” Hy praat in ’n diep stem, die een wat hy altyd gebruik wanneer hy die perd en Sierra die prinses is.

“Na my paleis toe!” Sy vryf oor sy kop. Jy moet jou hare laat groei, Pappa. Perde moet lang hare hê.”

“Jammer.” Jake runnik en begin na Sierra se kamer onder in die gang galop. “Hierdie perdjie moet sy hare kort hou, Prinses.”

“Dis oukei, perdjie,” sê sy en leun oor om hom op sy agterkop te soen. “Ek is nog steeds lief vir jou.”

Jake galop by Sierra se kamer in en steek plotseling voor haar bed vas. “U paleis, liewe prinses.”

Nadat Sierra afgegely het, voer sy haar weergawe van 'n koninklike kniebuiging uit. “Dankie.” Sy gee Jake se kop 'n ligte klappie. “Hou jy van my mooi rok, perdjie?”

Jake kap sy hoof soos 'n wilde hings in die lug en knik sy kop oordrewe. “Wie het jou so mooi gemaak, prinses Sierra?”

Die prinses-persona vervaag. Sierra maak haar mond toe en glimlag opreg op na hom. “Jesus het.” Sy vervolg in 'n vertroulike stem. “Ek gaan nou my Bybelboek lees, Pappa. Kom roep my nou-nou.”

Jake galop in 'n klein sirkeltjie en maak hom dan uit die voete. Hy gaan stort, trek aan en haal sy skeermes uit die kassie onder die badkamerwasbak. Terwyl hy skeer, kom lê daar 'n hartseer in sy hart. Hoekom kan Jamie nie haar kunsklas los en saam met hulle kom nie? Net een keer?

*Die lem gly sekuur oor die hoeke van sy gesig. Here ... hoe lank gaan dit nog so aangaan? Hoe lank voordat sy die lig sien en smag na wat ek en Sierra het?*

*Onthou, my seun, Ek het 'n goeie werk in haar begin, en Ek sal dit enduit voer.*

Jake se skeermes verstil bokant sy regterwangbeen. Hy het hierdie afgelope maand amper daagliksoortgelyke ervarings. Antwoorde diep uit sy binneste, elkeen met 'n boodskap so duidelik dat dit amper hoorbaar is. En die stil fluisterings in sy siel word telkens deur dieselfde herinnering vergesel. Hy en Jamie by die somerkamp van die Young Life-hoërskool die somer nadat hy klaargemaak het op kollege. Jake kan nie presies onthou wat hulle daardie week geleer het nie, maar wat dit ook al was, dit het tot Jamie gespreek.

Toe die kampeiers die jongmense nooi om vorentoe te kom as hulle vir Jesus wou lewe, was Jamie een van die eerstes op haar voete.

Later die aand het sy haar gevoelens aan Jake verduidelik. “Vir die eerste keer het die lewe betekenis. Dis asof ek nie hoef bang te wees dat iets slegs gaan gebeur nie. Want God het alles onder beheer.”

Jake was seker dat Jamie se besluit lewensveranderend sou wees. Sy eie besluit – destyds op agtjarige ouderdom – was gewis. Maar sy het van die begin af vrae gehad. Vrae en twyfel en 'n amper onmiddellike terugkeer na die hekel wat sy aan geloof en die kerk en aan God in die algemeen gehad het. Haar ouers se dood 'n paar jaar later het haar skeptisisme net aangevuur.

En die begrafnis van elke brandweerman daarna.

Vir Jamie is daar 'n gapende kloof tussen geloof en ongeloof, en daar is eenvoudig niks wat die afstand kan oorbrug nie. Niks of niemand buiten God self nie. En met verloop van tyd wil Jamie al hoe minder met God te doen hê.

Dit het dan die kern van Jake se gebede vir sy vrou geword. Dat God die belofte wat gedurig in sy hart weerklink, sal gestand doen. Dat Hy die geloof wat twee dekades gelede in Jamie begin het, sal voleindig. Die skeermeslem beweeg egalig oor sy ken. Elke keer wanneer hy vir haar bid, is dit of hy 'n gerusstelling ontvang, 'n wete, asof uit die hemel self. Hy twyfel nie vir 'n

oomblik daaraan nie. God *hoor* nie net wanneer hy vir Jamie bid nie; Hy is ook besig om elkeen van daardie gebede te *verhoor*.

Nou reeds.

Dit is hierdie wete wat Jake oortuig dat hy en God 'n ooreenkoms het. Dat Jake nêrens heen op pad is nie, dat sy liggaam nie die volgende een sal wees wat voor vyfduisend brandweermanne in uniform geparadeer sal word nie. Nie terwyl God op die drumpel staan om hom te gebruik om Jamie se lewenslange twyfel in die allermooiste toewyding te verander nie.

Sy is alreeds besig om te verander. Sy het immers vir Sierra 'n nuwe kerkrok gekoop. Jake staan terug en bestudeer sy gesig om te sien of hy iewers mis geskeer het. Ja, Jamie gee om. Net nie genoeg om saam met hulle kerk toe te gaan nie. Sy is 'n uur gelede hier weg vir ontbyt en 'n verflklas saam met 'n paar van die ander brandweermanne se vroue. Hierdie tweeweeklikse uitstappie gee haar 'n verskoning vir twee uit elke vier Sondae. Die ander twee is gesinsdae, het Jamie besluit. Om te gaan stap of fietsry of met die waterponie uit te gaan.

“God kan nie van jou verwag om elke naweek in die kerk deur te bring nie, of hoe?” Sy het al dikwels met Jake oor die onderwerp gegrap. Maar die realiteit was so duidelik soos daglig. Jamie wil nie gaan nie. En sy wil niks met die Here te doen hê nie.

En tog het sy vir Sierra 'n kerkrok gekoop.

Dis beter as haar reaksie 'n jaar gelede toe Jake hulle dogtertjie begin kerk toe neem het. Hy hoor nog die frustrasie in haar stem toe hulle die onderwerp die eerste keer bespreek het.

“Dis nie reg om haar kop vol feëverhale te stop nie.” Sy het sagter gepraat sodat Sierra nie moes hoor nie. “Sy het nie nodig om 'n klomp praatjies te hoor van 'n God wat ... ” sy het haar hande gelig, “ ... wat dalk nie eens bestaan nie.”

Jake het kalm gebly en ook in 'n gedempte stem gepraat. “Dit kan tog nie kwaad doen nie. Sy gaan prentjies teken en liedjies sing en leer om te bid.” Hy het haar sag aan die skouers geneem. “Is dit so sleg, Jamie?”

“Ja.” Sy het teruggetree en haar hande op haar heupe geplant. “Dit sal haar net teleurstel as iets slegs gebeur en ... en sy besef dat God net nog 'n fantasie is.”

“Sê nou Hy is nie?” Jake het op 'n afstand bly staan, haar die geleentheid gegun om sy woorde te verwerk. “Sê nou God bestaan regtig, Jamie? Wil jy Sierra regtig daarvan weerhou om Hom te ken? Net twee Sondae 'n maand?”

Op die ou end het Jamie ingestem – op een voorwaarde. “Moenie aan my karring nie, Jake. Ek sal iets anders kry om Sondae te doen, maar moet my nie saamsleep nie.”

Haar woorde maak nog seer, maar sedertdien het sy ver gevorder. Die afgelope paar maande het sy begin om Sierra oor die Sondagskool uit te vra, en luister sy terwyl hulle dogtertjie haar Bybelstories herhaal. Sy het die laaste maand selfs twee maal gesê dat sy dalk saam met hulle die Kersdiens sal bywoon. En nou die mooi rokkie.

Jake prop die krultang in en sy oë val op sy eenvoudige goue trouband. Hy is onbeskryflik lief vir haar. Ja, Jamie se oomblik van waarheid lê en wag. As sy gevoel van die Here se tydsberekening reg is, is dit naby. Hy trek 'n nuwe jeans en 'n oortrektrui aan.

“Sierra!” Hy roep in die rigting van sy oop kamerdeur. “Die skoonheidssalon is oop!”

“Jippie!” Sy kom giggelend en met wippende blonde hare aangehardloop. Hy raak nooit moeg vir haar nie, hou nooit op om hom aan haar lewe te verwonder nie. Sy was net een dag oud toe sy sy vingers vasgegryp het, en hy hare. Sedertdien het hy nog nie laat gaan nie.

Sy slaan haar arms styf om sy bene. “Ek het gedink dit gaan nooit oopmaak nie.”

Jake vryf oor haar hare. “Ons skoonheidsdeskundiges moet darem elke nou en dan 'n bietjie skeer.”

Sierra kelk haar handjies om sy kakebeen. “Mmmm. Lekker glad en sag. Soos Mamma daarvan hou.”

“En dis wat saak maak.” Jake grinnik.

“Jip.” Sierra knik. “Mamma sê sy hou van haar manne skoongesmeer.”

Hy onderdruk die laggie wat in sy maag kriewel. “Jy bedoel skoongeskeer.”

Sy dink vir 'n oomblik. “Jip, geskeer.”

“Nou goed, jonge dame, draai om.” Sierra gehoorsaam en gaan sit voor die spieël. Jake neem 'n haarstring en draai dit om die krultang. Hy vang Sierra se oë in die spieël. Haar glimlag het vervaag en daar is 'n somberder trek op haar gesiggie. Hy hou die krul. “Wat is fout, liefie?”

Daar is 'n klein fronsie tussen haar wenkbroue. “Ek dink ons moet vir Mamma bid.”

“Goed.” Jake draai die krultang los en 'n lok val oor Sierra se rug. “Hoekom?”

“Want toe Mamma my mooi rokkie gekoop het, het sy met my oor die kerk gepraat.”

“Het sy?” Die hoop ontvlam in Jake se hart terwyl hy nog 'n haarstring van die ander losmaak. “Wat het sy gesê?”

“Sy het vir my gevra of dit lekker is, en ek het ja gesê. Dit is die lekkerste ding in die wêreld.” Sierra konsentreer daarop om haar kop stil te hou. “Toe het sy vir my 'n geheim vertel. Iets wat net ek en sy weet.”

“Regtig?” 'n Geheim? Jake probeer om nie te angstig te klink terwyl hy die krultang uit Sierra se hare trek, en 'n tweede krul langs die eerste val nie.

“Kan jy vir my sê wat dit is?”

Sierra trek haar klein skouertjies op. “Seker maar.”

“Nou goed ... ” Jake verdeel haar hare in nog 'n lok. “Wat het sy vir jou gesê?”

“Wel ... ” Hulle oë ontmoet weer in die spieël en Sierra s'n is diep en wys vir haar jare. “Sy het gesê partykeer wens sy sy kon saam met ons kerk toe gaan.”

“Rêrig?” Jake sluk en laat nog 'n krul teen haar rug aftuimel. Hy dwing

homself om lighartig te klink. “Nou hoekom doen sy dit nie?”

“Want sy is nog nie gereed nie.” Sierra blyt op haar lip. “Dis hoekom ons vir haar moet bid. Sodat sy gereed sal word.”

Jake knik. Vir ’n rukkie is hy stil terwyl hy Sierra se hare klaarmaak. Toe prop hy die krultang uit en lei Sierra aan die hand na ’n stoel langs die voetenent van die bed. “Kom hier, my skat.” Hy gaan sit en tel Sierra op sy skoot. “Kom ons bid sommer nou. Dan kan ons by die kerk weer vir haar bid.”

“Oukei.” Sierra glimlag vir hom en vryf haar neusie teen syne. Toe word sy ernstig en maak haar oë toe terwyl sy haar kop net effentjies laat sak. Jake maak ook sy oë toe en luister. “Liewe Here.” Sierra se klein stemmetjie is helder. “Ek en Pappa maak gou gereed vir kerk. Maar dit vat baie lank vir Mamma.” Sy aarsel. “Help asseblief vir Mamma om gou-gou gereed te word. Want dan kan ons almal saam kerk toe gaan ... soos ’n gesin.”

Haar woorde bly vir ’n paar oomblikke in Jake se hart hang. Hy druk Sierra teen hom vas en wag dat die knop in sy keel verdwyn voordat hy haar op die wang soen. “Dankie, my skat.” Hy tel haar af, staan op en neem haar hand. “Ek weet sommer die Here is klaar aan die werk.”

Sierra bestudeer die krulle wat voor oor haar skouers val. “Dit krul nog nie genoeg nie, Pappa.”

“Dis ongelukkig al wat ons vandag kan doen. Anders gaan ons laat wees.”

“Oukei.” Sy blaas haar asem uit en kyk deur skrefiesoë na hom. “Is die agterste krulle wipperig genoeg?” Sy gaan staan ’n entjie voor hom en kyk op sodat haar hare amper tot in haar middel val.

“O ja ... dit is die wipperigste krulle wat ek nog ooit gesien het.” Jake gee twee tree tot by haar. “Kom, jong ... Ons wil nie die eerste liedjies mis nie.”

Hulle gaan met die trap af en toe hulle onder kom, steek Sierra vas. “Ons moet ons hande swaai, Pappa. Onthou? Ons swaai altyd hande.”

“Jy’s reg!” Jake kyk grootoog na haar. “Ek het amper vergeet.”

Sierra giggel, sit haar handjie in syne en dan loop hulle met swaaiende arms tot in die garage. Toe hulle in sy bakkie klim, kyk Sierra in sy oë en glimlag.

“Jesus min my’, oukei?”

“Oukei!”

Soos hulle altyd doen wanneer hulle saam kerk toe ry, val hulle weg met ’n weergawe van “Jesus min my” wat ’n koordirigent sal laat sidder. Maar een wat Jake weet hy nooit sal vergeet nie.

Selfs al word hy honderd jaar oud.

Sierra is moeg toe hulle na kerk by die huis kom, en Jake gaan sit by haar op die rusbank totdat sy aan die slaap raak. Toe dra hy haar op na haar kamer, sluip ondertoe en bel sy pa. Dis iets wat hy elke Sondag probeer doen.

“Hallo?”

“Pa ... dis Jake.”

“Ou seun!” Soos altyd klink sy pa sterk en tot oorlopend toe vol lewe. “Hoe was kerk?”

“Goed. Sierra het ’n nuwe rok aangehad en ’n prentjie van Moses geteken.” Jake gaan sit op ’n ou gemakstoel. Brownie, hulle labrador, kom agterna en gaan lê by sy voete. “Sy het vandag vir Jamie gebid.”

“Regtig?” Daar is ’n besorgde klank in sy stem. “Is alles reg?”

“Ja. Sy het gebid dat Jamie een van die dae gereed sal wees om kerk toe te kom.”

Sy pa wag ’n oomblik voordat hy praat. “Ek glo dit kom. Is sy nie maar in sekere opsigte soos ’n bang voëltjie nie?”

“Sy is.” Jake glimlag. “Bang om haar kop te ver uit die nes te steek.”

“Bang sy gaan val terwyl sy eintlik sal vlieg as sy haar maar net wil oorgee. Nes die res van ons.”

Jake probeer hom dit voorstel – hoe sy hele gesin saam in die geloof vlieg. “Dit sal gebeur.”

“Ja.”

Jake hoor hoe sy pa sy asem stadig intrek en kan hom amper sien waar hy op een van sy kroegstoeltjies by die kombuistoonbank sit en oor sy plaas uitkyk, die telefoonkoord styf gespan. Sy stem is ontspanne, soos dié van iemand wat God se vrede ken.

“Hoe gaan dit by die werk?”

“Goed. Ons het verlede naweek nog ’n begrafnis gehad.”

“Hmmm. Jammer om te hoor, seun. Iemand wat ek ken?”

“Nee. Hy was ’n leerlingbrandweerman, ’n jong outjie wat ’n hartaanval gekry het toe hy met die brandslang besig was.”

“Daar is hierdie jaar heelwat hartaanvalle.”

“Vier.”

“Hierdie soort goed hou die kapelaan besig. Ek onthou hoe swaar die begrafnisse was toe ek dit gedoen het. Sommige jare was sleg. Twintig, dertig mans wat in noodlottige brande dood is. Daar was gewoonlik nie soveel hartaanvalle nie.”

“Dit maak Jamie bekommerd oor my gesondheid.”

“Nee wat, jy’s so reg soos ’n roer.” Jim Bryan was op sy dag een van die gehardste brandweermanne in die mag. Maar sy stem bevat ’n ondertoon wat van ’n diep geloof en sagmoedigheid getuig. “Dis in elk geval God wat besluit wanneer ons tyd op aarde verby is.”

Jake sit agteroor in die stoel. “Hoe gaan dit met die perde?”

“Ek dink hulle kan nie wag vir die herfs nie. Dit is ’n warm somer.”

“Ons was amper elke naweek op die strand.”

’n Gemoedelike stilte kom lê vir ’n oomblik tussen hulle. “Wanneer kom julle kuier?”

“Dalk volgende naweek. Jamie wil vir ’n paar dae uit die stad kom.”

“Dit sal wonderlik wees om julle hier te hê. Ons kan die oggend perdry en later ’n vleisie oor die kole gooi.”

“En iewers moet ons tyd maak vir voetbal.”

“Definitief. Dit begin Maandagaand, nê?”



“By Denver.”

“Dan reël ons die kuier vir Saterdagoggend.”

“Ek sal Pa laat weet as enigiets verander.” Die voordeur gaan oop en Jamie kom in. Hulle oë ontmoet en hulle glimlag vir mekaar. “Ek groet eers, Pa. Dankie vir die gesels.”

“Laat weet my van die naweek.”

“Sal so maak.” Jake staan op en loop terug kombuis toe. “Ek’s lief vir Pa. Kyk mooi na Pa-self.”

“En ek’s lief vir jou.”

Jake lui af en gaan staan teen die toonbank. Sy oë ontmoet weer dié van sy vrou. “Haai.”

“Haai.” Sy loop na hom toe, haar een hand agter haar rug. Haar gesig is bruingebrand na Vrydag se stranduitstappie, en sy is nog net so mooi soos die dag toe hy met haar getrou het. “Hoe was kerk?”

“Lekker.” Hy rek sy nek en probeer loer wat sy agter haar rug vashou. Sy draai weg sodat hy nie kan sien nie, en hy kyk weer in haar oë. “Sierra het ’n prentjie van Moses geteken.”

Sy glimlag. “Dis baie mooi. Daar kan nooit te veel prentjies van Moses wees nie.” Jamie lig haar wenkbroue waardierend, ’n tergende glimlag om haar mondhoeke.

Jake hoef nie te sien wat agter haar rug is om te weet dat Jamie iets in die mou voer nie. Sy staan nader totdat hulle tone aan mekaar raak.

“Ek het iets vir jou.”

“Rêrig?” Jake se hand mik na wat sy agter haar rug wegsteek, maar sy gee ’n tree terug en laat sak haar ken, haar oë groot en speels.

“Nie so haastig nie. Jy mag nie loer nie.”

Jake dink daaraan om die present weer by haar te probeer afneem. Hy is mal oor hierdie speelse oomblikke in hulle verhouding. “Nou goed.” Hy maak sy oë toe en hou sy een hand voor hom uit. Hy voel amper dadelik hoe sy iets kouds daarop neersit. “Kan ek oopmaak?”

“Ja, man.” Sy gee ’n opgeruimde laggie. “Maak maar oop.”

Hy maak so en in sy hand is ’n geverfde keramiekbeeldjie wat vyftien sentimeter lank is van ’n brandweerman met ’n beskermengel agter hom. Elkeen van die fyn detail is versigtig ingeverf. Geen wonder sy is later as gewoonlik nie. “Jamie ... dis pragtig. Het jy dit gevef?”

Hulle oogkontak duur ’n oomblik langer, en hy kan sien dat sy sy reaksie geniet. “Die outjie het nogal soos jy gelyk.” Sy gee ’n laggie. “Toe gee ek vir hom donker hare en blou oë.”

“En ’n engel wat oor my wag hou.”

“Jip. Kom ons sit dit waar ek dit kan sien, oukei?”

Jake vleg sy vingers deur die hare agter in haar nek. “Dankie.” Hy laat sak sy kop en soen haar. Dan draai hy na die kombuiswasbak. Aan weerskante is daar rakkies waar Jamie al die snuisterye uitstal wat hulle met die jare versamel het.

Hy sit die klein beeldjie op die laagste rak regs van die wasbak. “Net hier.” Hy staan terug. “Nou kan ons dit elke keer sien wanneer ons in die kombuis is.”

Jamie kom staan styf onder sy blad. Sy kyk weer na die beeldjie. “Dink jy dis waar?”

“Wat?” Jamie dra ’n moulose wit toppie en Jake streel oor haar kaal arm.

“Die beskermengel.” Jamie lig haar oë na syne. “Dink jy dis moontlik?”

“Natuurlik.” Jake glimlag vir haar en soen haar hierdie keer op haar voorkop.

“Ek gaan nooit by die deur uit sonder ’n baie groter engel aan my sy nie.”

“Ek hoop jy is reg.” ’n Blinkheid verskyn in haar oë. “Want ek het soort van ’n geheim.”

“’n Geheim?” Gaan sy vir hom sê wat sy vanoggend met Sierra gedeel het, dat sy amper gereed is om kerk toe te gaan? Sy oë drink haar in. “Watse geheim?”

“Die geheim dat ek jou nodig het, Jake Bryan.” Sy fluister gesmoord. “Ek sal dit nie kan verduur as daar iets met jou gebeur nie.”

“Ag, Jamie.” Jake sit sy ander arm om haar en trek haar teen hom vas. Sy is altyd só na ’n begrafnis. Maar dis asof die een van verlede week haar meer as die ander ontstel. “Daar gaan niks met my gebeur nie, my lief.”

“Daar beter nie.” Sy prewel die woorde teen sy nek. Haar trane drup op sy skouer en maak ’n nat kol op sy trui.

“Daar sal nie.” Hy lig sy kop en soen haar stadig. “Ek belowe.”

Hulle bly ’n rukkie so staan. Jake koester die gevoel van sy vrou in sy arms en glo met sy hele hart dat dit wat hy vir haar gesê het, waar is. Natuurlik is dit gevaarlik om ’n brandweerman te wees. Maar geld dit nie ook vir bestuur en loop en asemhaal nie? Jake is seker dat daar niks met hom gaan gebeur nie.

Hy en God het immers ’n ooreenkoms.

# Chapter SIX

SEPTEMBER 10, 2001

The pace had been crazy since Eric Michaels stepped off the airplane at La Guardia Saturday afternoon.

Many of Koppel and Grant's top clients sensed that recent downward shifts in the market might be a precursor to something bigger. Dozens of them were demanding reports on safer stocks, technology and pharmaceuticals, defense and service sector holdings. Eric hadn't worked his way to the top by being wrong. In fact, his track record on investments was practically unmatched in the business. But in a sluggish market like this, Eric worked fifteen hours a day either researching or developing instinct. Weekends were no different.

It was Monday, and so far his day was like any other when he was in Manhattan. Up at five-thirty, three miles on a treadmill in the hotel basement, weight lifting for another twenty minutes, followed by a quick shower and a light breakfast. The entire time he was mentally calculating which segments of which portfolios could be diversified or sold for the purchase of a single stock.

Thoughts of Laura and Josh were relegated to the flight home on Thursday.

Koppel and Grant's New York office was located on the sixty-fourth floor of the World Trade Center south tower. The company leased space from an insurance company and kept a staff of just fifty-six people. The smaller the overhead, the more profits at the top. That was R. Allen Koppel's attitude. And Allen ran the company, no question about it. Robert Grant III had passed away two years earlier. His name stayed on the company stationery, and no one had taken his place.

Eric hoped someday the position would be his. Koppel, Grant, and Michaels. Or even Koppel and Michaels. Either way it had a certain ring to

it, a ring that kept Eric up at nights even when he had to be back at the office in a scant five or six hours. Yes, Koppel ran the show. But since Grant's death, Eric had become increasingly important to the firm. The decisions they would make that week had more money riding on them than any they'd made in so short a time. That's why Eric was in New York: Koppel needed him.

And the knowledge of that felt better than anything Eric could imagine.

At eight o'clock sharp he stepped off the elevator at the sixty-fourth floor, turned right down one hallway and then another, until he came to a heavy walnut door with a brass plate that read "Koppel and Grant." Eric stared at it for a moment and caught his reflection in the polished metal. *There I am ... right where I belong. It's my company ... and one day the sign will say so.*

He breezed inside and walked past the secretary.

She looked up briefly. "Mr. Koppel's in his office."

"Thanks." The secretary was new, but Eric never broke stride. Secretaries at Koppel and Grant were paid modestly and expected to keep busy. Overtime hours were part of the job. Secretaries who didn't like the work conditions were replaced. Eric visited the New York office at least once every six months, and he rarely walked past the same secretary twice.

He spent the rest of the day with Allen, crunching numbers and making decisions about the portfolios of a dozen top clients. Sometime after eight o'clock that evening, Allen pushed back from his desk.

"That'll do it for today." A grin spanned the short distance from one side of Allen's face to the other. "Lets go meet some women."

Allen was thin and wiry, a diminutive man who ate little and drank less. He was fifty-three, and Eric figured the man weighed maybe a hundred and twenty pounds with his designer suit, dress shoes, and leather portfolio. He was so thin his shoulders and elbows looked knobby even through his clothes. The three wives he'd married and divorced had been

nothing more than short-term mistresses, because his first love was without question Koppel and Grant.

But each of the wives had cost him, and Allen didn't intend to make the same mistake a fourth time. Allen and Eric spoke on the phone several times each week, and apparently Allen had become quite the player in the Manhattan nightclub scene. Allen was aware that generally speaking, women dated him for his millions. When they realized he wasn't interested in sharing his last name, most moved on. Allen had already complained that he hadn't had a date since August.

"You with me on this, Michaels?" Allen stood up and slid several folders into his briefcase.

"You're serious?" Eric studied his boss for a moment. "We have another hour at least."

"Nah." Allen waved his hand at the paperwork spread out across the desk between them. "We got further than I thought." He smiled again. "Besides, the work'll still be here tomorrow."

Every now and then, Allen did something like this. Surprised Eric and showed a side of himself less machinelike than usual. A side that was almost human. Eric shrugged. "I'll go." He raised one eyebrow. "But no women, Allen. I'm married, remember?"

Allen made a brushing motion with his hand and frowned. "Marriage never lasts. Besides, with a face like yours, women'll line up."

"No women, sir." Eric gave his boss a crooked grin. "But I'll take dinner."

Allen thought about that for a moment. "Okay." He sighed. "I'll change your mind while we eat. Where to?"

"Your choice."

"Well, then ... Windows on the World, my boy. What else is there when you work in the World Trade Center?"

The restaurant was at the top of the World Trade Center's north tower, more than a hundred floors off the ground. The two men made a point of

having at least one power lunch or client dinner there every time Eric was in town. This would be somewhat different, since no clients were involved.

An elevator led them to the ground level, where they walked next door and took another elevator up to the restaurant. The maître d' led them to a table against a wall of windows, and Eric slid his chair as close to the glass as he could. Darkness had settled over the city, and a sea of twinkling lights spread out before him. The view couldn't have been any better from an airplane.

"Amazing, isn't it?" Eric looked out and realized once more the incredible height of the Twin Towers. The two buildings stood like a couple of giants. Redwoods among a forest of saplings.

Allen ordered sautéed mushrooms and a two-hundred-dollar bottle of Chardonnay. He waited until the waitress had served them each a glass before speaking again. "You're looking good, Eric. Taking care of yourself."

"I try." Eric settled back in his chair and sipped the wine. He drank only for appearances, at times like these. Never for any other reason. He couldn't afford for his mind to be anything less than sharp. Eric set his glass down. "Still running and lifting."

"Good." Allen leaned forward. "You need to stay fit, Eric. You'll be head of the company one day."

A burst of adrenaline raced through Eric's veins. "Yes, sir ... I hope so." It was all Eric could do to stay in his seat. He'd always believed that one day the position would be his, but Allen had never come out and said so. Not until now. Eric took a slow, deliberate swallow of wine and managed an appropriate smile. "I'd like that."

Allen winked at him. "Don't get me wrong. I still have a dozen good years left." He leaned his forearms on the table. "But you'll take over one day. No one else is close."

Eric didn't know what to say. The waitress appeared with their mushrooms and gave them each a small plate. Her demure smile conveyed

more than an interest in their dining pleasure, and Eric noticed she lingered near him a little longer than necessary. They made small talk for a minute or so, then she took their order and turned back to the kitchen.

The moment she was gone, Allen raised an eyebrow. “She’s crazy about you.” He whispered the words. “Give her your hotel number when we’re done.”

“Now ...” Eric chuckled and shook his head. His many years of marriage to Laura actually baffled his boss. Eric helped himself to three mushrooms and flashed his gold wedding band at Allen. “Laura wouldn’t like that too much.”

“Ahh, Laura would never know.” Allen pushed his chair back and crossed one leg over the other. “Besides, look at you. Handsome, fit. Women fall all over you every time we’re out together.”

Eric raised a single eyebrow. “The same way they’ve done for you.”

“They want my money. Nothing more.”

“And they got it—at least a fair amount of it if I’m not mistaken, sir. Isn’t that right?”

It was Allen’s turn to laugh. “You have me there.” He gestured toward the kitchen. “But women like that would be happy with a single night’s entertainment, Eric. You’re thousands of miles from home.” He took two mushrooms and cut into one of them. “Who would know?”

Eric was trying to think up an answer when something caught his eye.

At the table adjacent to theirs along the window, a family was being seated. A businessman, a woman who must’ve been his wife, and two children. A boy and girl about the same age as Josh. The woman helped them get seated and then tied a bouquet of red and white helium balloons on the back of the girl’s chair.

A birthday party. Like the one he’d missed a week ago for Josh.

Allen was saying something about the oil companies and the impact an embargo could make on a host of reports the next quarter, but Eric wasn’t listening. He was caught up in the drama unfolding just behind

Allen at the next table.

The couple sat side by side, their elbows on the linen tablecloth, hands linked in a way that showed off the woman's wedding ring. The children were busy with their menus, and the man whispered something to the woman. Whatever he said, his wife giggled and kissed him full on the lips.

Just then the young girl looked up and clucked her tongue. Eric could barely make out her words. "Mom, you guys act like teenagers." But instead of looking bothered, the woman kissed her husband again and said something Eric couldn't hear.

"Eric? You listening to me?" Allen finished his first glass of wine and poured a second.

If it was like other meals they'd shared, Eric doubted he'd finish it. One and a half glasses was his usual stopping point on the rare occasion when he drank.

"Absolutely, sir." Eric snapped to attention. "Every word."

"As I was saying, the prospects of an embargo may be slim, but those Arab nations are a finicky group. Back in the eighties when ..."

Again Eric tuned out. The family at the next table was holding hands now, their eyes closed, heads bowed. The birthday girl did the praying. Eric strained to listen. "Lord, we're thankful for all we have. For Mom and Dad and for each other. I pray we have as much fun together this year as we did last." She paused. "Oh, and thank You for the food."

Eric averted his eyes so they wouldn't see him staring. He nodded his agreement to Allen and focused once more on the family. Distractions didn't usually affect his business conversations. But the family's interactions were spellbinding, as though Eric were seeing them unfold on a movie screen.

The man reached across the table and took hold of the girl's fingers. "Happy birthday, honey." He patted her hand and grinned at the boy beside her. The boy puffed out his chest, his voice a little louder than the others.



“Don't worry, Dad. I might be younger but I'll look out for her. When the boys come calling ... I'll be ready.”

“Here you are.” The waitress was back, and Eric jumped a little in his seat. She set a plate of roasted chicken and vegetables in front of him, and shrimp for Allen. Then she stepped back, made direct eye contact with Eric and held it. “If there's anything else I can do for you, let me know.”

When she was gone, Allen pointed his fork at Eric. “See ... I told you. Whatever you want, she'll do it. She's yours, Eric. Did you take a look at her legs? You're crazy if you pass this one up.”

Eric picked up his knife and fork, and for the first time in years, he thought about praying. Not out loud the way the family beside them had done. But quietly, in his heart out of thanks for all God had done, all Eric hadn't thanked Him for in the years since the death of their unborn daughter.

But the moment passed quickly.

It was too late for casual conversation with God—even words of thanks. He and God had parted ways long ago, and Eric doubted they'd ever make amends again. Besides, he was doing pretty well without God. Second in command for one of the most powerful financial groups in Manhattan, with the presidency looming just a few years away. A better house, car, and savings account than anyone his age had a right to.

And all of it a direct reflection of his own hard work. If anyone deserved a vote of thanks it was him, not God.

The family at the table beside them finished eating and left, while the meal Eric and Allen shared lingered another half hour. When it was finally over, Allen paid the bill, and Eric finished his third glass of wine. More than he'd had in months, years even. His head buzzed, and a warm feeling crept over him as they left the table.

Eric was careful not to look at the waitress as he left the restaurant. He didn't want to give her the wrong idea, because the truth was, he hadn't the slightest interest in her. Laura was his wife, and he wouldn't go out with

other women behind her back. He might not have had the best relationship with Laura, but he wasn't about to complicate his life with an affair. Nothing about the idea appealed to him. He'd talked about it with Murphy at the Los Angeles office once a few months ago.

“Ever notice how the things you lust after change in a job like this?” They'd been waiting for the elevator late one night.

“Yeah.” Murphy huffed. “You got that right.”

“Used to be love and sex.” Eric had narrowed his eyes. “Now it's power and money. Success. And you know what?”

“You like it better?”

“I do.” Eric had been incredulous about the fact. “The things that make life exciting are within my control, no one else's. I like it that way.”

The conversation played again in Eric's mind as he and Allen rode the elevators down a hundred floors to ground level. Outside, Allen hailed a cab and grinned at Eric. “How 'bout some nightlife?”

It was after ten o'clock and Eric was tired. Maybe it was the wine, but he couldn't stop thinking about the family he'd watched earlier. “No, sir. I'm turning in.” A cab pulled up, and Eric flagged down another driver ten yards down the street.

“Okay, then. Two cabs it is.” Allen stepped into the backseat. “See you tomorrow. Eight o'clock.”

“Yes, sir.” Eric's cab pulled up as Allen shut the door of his.

Back at his hotel, Eric thought about turning on the television but decided against it. He hated TV, hated the way it wasted his time. And tonight he couldn't have focused if he'd wanted to. Not because of the wine. But because images of the family at the restaurant kept running through his head. The way the woman's eyes sparkled as she kissed her husband, the gentle way he touched his daughter's hand. The humor and closeness and determination to pray even in a public place.

Had he and Laura and Josh ever been that way? The picture of a loving, well-adjusted family? Had Laura ever kissed him like that, her eyes

aglow with the joy of simply being with him? Eric racked his brain trying to remember. Certainly they'd loved like that at some point.

He hung his suit coat up in the mirrored closet and ran his hand over it so it wouldn't wrinkle during the night. Fifteen minutes later he turned the lights off and propped himself up in bed. He wasn't tired enough to lie down, and a glow from the city filtered through a crack in the drapes. His vision blurred some, and he felt his eyes close. As they did, a memory drifted in. Laura and him in their early days, back when they were still in college. They'd both been vocal about their faith, committed to God, determined to stay pure until they were married.

It was the reason they'd walked down the aisle when Laura was just eighteen, barely out of high school. Eric had been working on his master's degree back then, and money was scarce. When his parents arranged for them to live in Eric's aunt's guest house, he and Laura jumped at the chance. The place was small, two hundred square feet tops. It smelled old and musty, and they called it "the bunker." When they weren't asleep or in class, they spent most of their time sitting outside on a weathered picnic table, him playing his guitar while they sang and talked about the future.

Back then life was simple. The memory Eric could see now was from a night like that, crickets keeping time in the distant background and a canopy of stars sparkling overhead. He could see himself, finishing whatever song he'd been singing. He set the guitar down and leaned closer to Laura. "I love to sing." He'd brought his face closer to Laura.

"Mmmm." She closed her eyes. "I love to hear you."

"Know what else I love?" He'd leaned in and traced the outline of her lips with his finger.

"The bunker?" she giggled, wrinkling her nose in a way she never did anymore.

He waited until her laughter faded. Then he framed her face with his hands and gave her a kiss that was both long and unhurried. When he drew back, he let his forehead fall against hers. "No, crazy girl. I love being with

you. Everything about you.” He eased back some and his eyes locked on hers. “I love you, Laura.”

And suddenly the memory was playing out before him as clearly as the scene from the restaurant earlier that evening. Yes, there it was ... Laura's eyes *had* sparkled like the stars above them. Like the eyes of the woman in the restaurant. The memory blurred some, and Eric forced himself to think. What had happened next? Something important, wasn't it? Something he'd thought about often after that night until ... until their baby girl died and life somehow fell flat. Until some point when it had stopped being important.

He opened his eyes and stared at the dark hotel ceiling. Gradually, the rest of the memory returned, and he closed his eyes again. Laura had stood up and made a small, slow circle, glancing at everything around her—Eric ... his guitar ... the picnic table ... the bunker ... even the cracked cement patio where they'd spent so many evenings.

“What're you doing?” He'd been amused by her actions.

“I'm taking it in.” She leaned her head back and breathed in deep through her nose. “Every single detail.”

“Of this?” Eric had given a short laugh. “This is nothing.” He stood and caught Laura in his arms. “But one day, Laura, one day I promise you'll have it all.” He studied her face. “You'll live like a queen, the way you deserve to.”

Laura had only smiled at him. “You don't get it, do you?”

“What?” He'd searched her eyes.

“I already do. No matter how much money we make when we're older, all I need is you, Eric. You and God.” She took another slow breath, as though she were trying to bottle the moment deep within her. “Nothing in the world could make me happier than I am right now.”

The images in his mind faded, and he opened his eyes again. Instinct turned his head to the clock on the nightstand. It was after midnight. He'd be going on fumes all day tomorrow if he didn't get some sleep. Yet as he

lay there, still the memory haunted him. And in that moment, still groggy from the wine, his conversation with Murphy came back to him. The one about power and money and success.

How had those things replaced what he and Laura had shared that night outside the bunker? And why had he stopped playing the guitar? The soft refrains had comforted him back then, mingling with the evening breeze and giving him the sense that all was right with the world. Playing the guitar had been one way he could slow down, focus on God and the people in his life and not just the tempting, all-consuming notion of getting ahead.

That was all that mattered to him these days. Eric blinked and rolled onto his other side. Was there anything wrong with that? With thinking and acting differently than he'd done a decade earlier?

It wasn't that he wanted to forget about physical or emotional love, really. It was just that there wasn't time for those things. Back when he and Laura first married, they'd had all the time in the world. That had changed as the years went by, and it didn't make life better or worse now. Just different. Anyway, love could wait; Laura wasn't going anywhere. She and Josh would be around when he was finished climbing the ladder and slowed down some. Either when he took over for Grant or sooner, if they picked up the right accounts.

In the meantime Laura didn't want for anything. In fact, these days if she stopped and looked around the way she'd done that night at the bunker, she'd see that he'd more than made good on his promise. A Cadillac SUV in the garage, five thousand square feet of custom home in the nicest area of Westlake Village. An in-ground pool and daily maid service. Memberships to all the right clubs and, for Josh, enrollment at Westmont Academy, an elite private Christian school.

Laura might not be perfectly happy, but one thing was certain: She lived like a queen.

The fact was enough to ease Eric's mind. In a matter of seconds, his

eyes closed once more, and he could feel himself drifting off to sleep. He comforted his conscience with one last fact before he dropped off. The hours he put in at work were all for Laura and Josh. And love? Love would come later.

They had all the time in the world.

## Ses

10 September 2001

Sedert Eric Michaels se vliegtuig Saterdagmiddag by La Guardia neergestryk het, was daar nog nie tyd vir stilsit nie.

Baie van Koppel & Grant se grootste kliënte voel aan dat die onlangse afwaartse swaai in die mark 'n aanwyser van iets groters is. Baie van hulle dring aan op verslae oor veiliger aandele, tegnologiese en farmaseutiese, verdedigings- en dienssektorbeleggings. Eric het hierdie pos nie losgeslaan deur foute te maak nie. Trouens, sy prestasies ten opsigte van beleggings is feitlik ongeëwenaar in die bedryf. Maar in 'n stadige mark soos dié werk Eric vyftien ure 'n dag aan navorsing of selfstudie. Naweke is geen uitsondering nie.

Dis Maandag en tot dusver verloop sy dag soos enige ander wanneer hy in Manhattan is. Hy staan halfses op en nadat hy vyf kilometer op die trapmeul gehardloop het en nog twintig minute met gewigte geoefen het, spring hy onder die stort en eet 'n ligte ontbyt. Dít terwyl hy bereken watter segmente van watter portefeuilles gediversifiseer moet word of vir die moontlike aankoop van 'n enkele aandeel verkoop kan word.

Gedagtes aan Laura en Josh word na Donderdag se terugvlug geskuif.

Koppel & Grant se kantoor in New York is op die vier-en-sestigste vloer van die suidelike toring van die World Trade Center geleë. Die maatskappy huur die kantoorspasie by 'n versekeringsmaatskappy en hulle personeel bestaan uit slegs ses-en-vyftig mense. Hoe kleiner die oorhoofse kostes, hoe groter die winste vir die topbestuur. Dit is hoe R. Allen Koppel se kop werk. En maak geen fout nie, Allen bestuur die maatskappy. Robert Grant III is twee jaar tevore oorlede. Sy naam verskyn steeds op die maatskappy se briefhoofde, en sy plek is nog nie deur iemand anders ingeneem nie.

Eric hoop dat die pos eendag syne sal wees. Koppel, Grant & Michaels. Of dalk selfs Koppel & Michaels. Hoe dit ook al sy, sy naam hoort daar. Dis hierdie ambisie wat Eric snags wakker hou, selfs as hy oor 'n skrale vyf of ses uur terug op kantoor moet wees. Ja, Koppel is die grootbaas. Maar sedert Grant se dood is Eric besig om al hoe belangriker vir die maatskappy te word. Die besluite wat hierdie week geneem moet word, behels meer geld as

enigiets wat hulle al ooit in so 'n kort tydjie moes neem. Dis waarom Eric in New York is: Koppel het hom nodig.

En hierdie wete voel beter as enigiets wat Eric hom kan voorstel.

Dit is op die kop agtuur toe die hysbak die vier-en-sestigste vloer bereik. Hy draai regs in twee gange en loop tot voor 'n swaar houtdeur met 'n koperplaat waarop die woorde “Koppel & Grant” staan. Eric kyk vir 'n oomblik na sy beeld in die gepoleerde metaal. *Dis waar ek hoort. Dis my maatskappy ... en eendag gaan dit op hierdie naambord staan.*

Hy sweef as't ware in en loop verby die sekretaresse.

Sy kyk vlugtig op. “Meneer Koppel is in sy kantoor.”

“Dankie.” Die sekretaresse is nuut, maar Eric merk dit bloot terloops. Die sekretaresses by Koppel & Grant ontvang 'n beskeie salaris en daar word van hulle verwag om besig te bly. Oortyd is deel van die werk. Sekretaresses wat nie van die werктоestande hou nie, word vervang. Eric kom minstens elke ses maande New York toe en hy loop selde verby dieselfde sekretaresse.

Hy en Allen is die res van die dag toegegooi onder syfers en besluite oor die portefeuljes van 'n dosyn topkliënte. Dit is na agt die aand toe Allen sy stoel terugstoot.

“Dis genoeg vir een dag.” 'n Glimlag verskyn op Allen se smal gesig. “Ek kan nou doen met 'n bietjie vrouegeselskap.”

Allen is maer en seningrig, 'n klein mannetjie wat min eet en nog minder drink. Hy is drie-en-vyftig en Eric skat die man weeg dalk vyf-en-vyftig kilogram mét sy ontwerperspak, formele skoene en leer-aktetas. Hy is so maer dat sy skouers en elmboë selfs deur sy klere knobbelrig vertoon. Die drie vroue wat hy getrou en geskei het, was niks meer as korttermyn-minnaresse nie, want sy eerste liefde is ongetwyfeld Koppel & Grant.

Maar elkeen van sy vroue het hom gelos, en Allen is nie van plan om dieselfde fout 'n vierde keer te maak nie. Allen en Eric praat 'n paar maal per week oor die telefoon, en skynbaar is Allen deesdae 'n bekende gesig in die nagklubs in Manhattan. Allen weet dat die meeste vroue bloot ter wille van sy geld met hom uitgaan. Wanneer hulle besef dat hy nie van plan is om die groot vraag te vra nie, maak hulle hulle uit die voete. Allen het hoeka gekla dat hy Augustus laas op 'n afspraak was.

“Is jy in, Michaels?” Allen staan op en steek 'n paar portefeuljes in sy aktetas.

“Is jy ernstig?” Eric bestudeer die man vir 'n oomblik. “Ons het minstens nog 'n uur.”

“Nee, wat.” Allen maak 'n gebaar na die papierwerk op die lessenaar tussen hulle. “Ons het verder gekom as wat ek gedink het.” Hy glimlag weer. “Die werk gaan in elk geval môre nog hier wees.”

Elke nou en dan doen Allen so iets en verras Eric deur die minder masjienagtige sy van homself te wys. 'n Amper menslike sy. Eric haal sy skouers op. “Ek's in.” Hy lig 'n wenkbrou. “Maar geen vroue nie, Allen. Ek's 'n getroude man.”

Allen maak 'n afwysende gebaar en frons. “Huwelike hou nie. Met 'n gesig

soos joune sal die vroue in elk geval toustaan.”

“Ek stel nie belang in vroue nie.” Eric grinnik. “Maar ek sê nie nee vir iets te ete nie.”

Allen oordink sy woorde vir ’n oomblik. “Nou goed.” Hy sug. “Ek sal jou ompraat wanneer ons eers daar is. Waarnatoe gaan ons?”

“Kies jy.”

“Nou ja, dan is dit Windows on the World, my vriend. Hoekom sal ’n mens iewers anders heen gaan as jy in die World Trade Center werk?”

Die restaurant is op die boonste vloer van die noordelike toring van die World Trade Center geleë, meer as honderd verdiepings van die grond af. Tydens Eric se besoeke maak die twee mans altyd ’n punt daarvan om ten minste een sake-ete daar te geniet. Hierdie keer gaan ’n bietjie anders wees, aangesien daar nie kliënte betrokke is nie.

’n Hysbak neem hulle na die grondvloer van waar hulle langsaan toe loop en ’n ander hysbak na die boonste vloer neem. Die maître d’ lei hulle na ’n tafel teen ’n muur wat uit vensters bestaan, en Eric skuif sy stoel tot amper teen die glas. Dit het donker geword en ’n see glinsterende liggies lê onder hom. Nie eens ’n vliegtuig kan jou so ’n uitsig bied nie.

“Dit bly ongelooflik.” Eric word opnuut deur die duiselingwekkende hoogte van die Twin Towers getref. Die geboue troon soos twee reuse bokant die stad uit. Soos mammoetbome in ’n woud vol jong boompies.

Allen bestel pangebreaide sampioene en ’n bottel Chardonnay van tweehonderd dollar. Hy wag totdat die kelnerin vir hulle albei geskink het voordat hy weer praat. “Jy lyk goed, Eric. Ek kan sien jy kyk na jouself.”

“Ek probeer.” Eric sit agteroor en neem ’n sluk van sy wyn. By sulke geleentheid drink hy slegs ter wille van die skyn. Nooit om enige ander rede nie. Hy kan nie bekostig om nié vlymskerp te wees nie. Eric sit sy glas neer. “Ek hardloop en gym nog.”

“Dis goed.” Allen leun vorentoe. “Jy moet fiks bly, Eric. Jy gaan nog eendag hoof van die maatskappy wees.”

Die adrenalien bruis deur Eric se are. “’n Mens kan maar net hoop.” Dis met inspanning dat Eric nie uit sy stoel spring nie. Hy het altyd geglo dat die posisie eendag aan hom sal behoort, maar Allen het dit nog nooit in soveel woorde gesê nie. Eric neem ’n stadige, doelbewuste sluk wyn en slaag daarin om besadig te glimlag. “Dit sal ’n voorreg wees.”

Allen knipoog vir hom. “Moet my nie verkeerd verstaan nie. Ek het nog ’n klompie goeie jare voor my.” Hy rus met sy voorarms op die tafel. “Maar jy sal eendag by my oorneem. Jy is die ander myle voor.”

Eric weet nie wat om te sê nie. Die kelnerin verskyn met hulle sampioene en gee vir elkeen ’n klein bordjie. Haar stemmige glimlag verklap meer as belangstelling in hulle bestelling, en Eric merk dat sy ’n bietjie langer as wat nodig is, naby hom talm. Hulle praat vir ’n minuut of wat oor gemeenplase, dan neem sy hulle bestelling en loop kombuis toe.

Allen lig ’n wenkbrou toe sy wegloop. “Sy’s mal oor jou.” Hy fluister die



woorde. “Gee jou hotelnommer vir haar voor ons loop.”

“Kom nou ...” Eric gee ’n laggie en skud sy kop. Sy jare lange huwelik met Laura is vir sy baas ’n raaisel. Eric neem vir hom drie sampioene en hou sy hand met sy trouring op. “Laura sal nie baie daarvan hou nie.”

“Aa, Laura sal nooit weet nie.” Allen stoot sy stoel terug en kruis sy bene. “Buitendien, kyk na jou. Aantreklik, fiks. Die vroumense val omtrent elke keer oor jou wanneer ons saam uitgaan.”

Eric lig ’n wenkbrou. “Hulle val maar oor jou ook.”

“Hulle wil net my geld hê. Niks anders nie.”

“En hulle het dit gekry – ’n taamlieke hoeveelheid, as ek nie ’n fout maak nie?”

Dis Allen se beurt om te lag. “Ek pleit skuldig.” Hy wys na die kombuis.

“Maar hierdie soort meisie sal met een nag se pret tevrede wees, Eric. Jy is duisende kilometers van die huis af.” Hy sny ’n sampioen middeldeer. “Wie sal weet?”

Eric is nog besig om aan ’n antwoord te dink toe iets sy oog vang.

’n Gesin is besig om by die tafel langs hulle te gaan sit. ’n Sakeman, ’n vrou en twee kinders. ’n Seuntjie en dogtertjie van omtrent Josh se ouderdom. Nadat die vrou die tweetjies sitgemaak het, bind sy ’n paar rooi en wit heliumballonne aan die rugkant van die dogtertjie se stoel vas.

’n Verjaardagpartytjie. Soos die een vir Josh wat hy ’n week gelede misgeloop het.

Allen praat oor oliemaatskappye en die impak wat ’n invoerverbod volgende kwartaal op ’n magdom verslae kan hê, maar Eric luister nie. Hy is vasgevang in die toneeltjie wat by die tafel agter Allen afspeel.

Die paartjie sit langs mekaar, hulle elmboë op die linnetafeldoek en die trouring duidelik sigbaar aan die vrou se hand wat in haar man s’n rus. Die kinders is doenig met hulle spyskaarte en die man fluister iets vir die vrou. Wat hy ook al gesê het, laat haar giggel en sy soen hom vol op die mond.

Terselfdertyd kyk die dogtertjie op en klik met haar tong. Eric kan net-net hoor wat sy sê. “Ma, julle is erger as twee tieners.” Die vrou lyk egter glad nie gesteurd nie, maar soen haar man weer en sê iets wat Eric nie kan hoor nie.

“Eric? Luister jy?” Allen se eerste glas wyn is op en hy skink ’n tweede.

Indien vanaand soos enige van hulle ander ete-afsprake verloop, twyfel Eric of hy die glas sal klaarmaak. Een en ’n halwe glas wyn is gewoonlik sy limiet wanneer hy die enkele kere wel drink.

“Natuurlik.” Allen het dadelik sy aandag. “Elke woord.”

“Soos ek sê, die kans vir ’n invoerverbod is dalk skraal, maar daardie Arabiese lande is ’n punteneurige klomp. Destyds in die tagtigerjare toe ...”

Eric se gedagtes koers weer na die ander tafel. Die gesin het nou hande geneem en hulle oë toegemaak. Die enetjie wat verjaar, bid vir hulle. “Here, baie dankie vir alles wat ons het. Vir Mamma en Pappa en vir mekaar. Ek bid dat ons hierdie jaar net so gelukkig soos laas jaar sal wees.” Sy aarsel. “O, en dankie vir die kos.”

Eric slaan sy oë neer sodat hulle nie moet sien dat hy staar nie. Hy knik

afgetrokke op wat Allen sê voordat sy blik weer na die gesin beweeg. Hy het gewoonlik nie soveel moeite om op besigheidsverwante gesprekke te konsentreer nie. Maar Eric sit betowerd na die gesin se interaksie en kyk, amper asof dit op 'n rolprentskerm voor hom ontvou.

Die pa steek sy hand oor die tafel en neem sy dogtertjie s'n. "Geluk met jou verjaarsdag, my skat." Hy gee haar hand 'n drukkie en glimlag vir die seuntjie langs haar. Die outjie stoot sy bors uit, sy stem 'n bietjie luidrugtiger as die ander s'n. "Pa hoef nie te *worry* nie. Ek sal na haar kyk. As die kêrels pla ... ek's reg vir hulle."

"Die hoofgereg." Die kelnerin is terug en Eric wip effens op sy stoel. Sy sit 'n bord gebakte hoender en groente voor hom neer, en garnale vir Allen. Dan staan sy terug, maak direkte oogkontak met Eric en bly in sy oë kyk terwyl sy praat. "As daar nog enigiets is wat ek vir julle kan doen, moet julle net sê."

Toe sy weg is, wys Allen met sy vurk na Eric. "Sien ... ek't jou gesê. Sy het dit so te sê uitgespel, Eric. Sy wil jou hê. Het jy haar bene gesien? Dis wraggies jou eie skuld as jy vanaand alleen slaap."

Eric neem sy mes en vurk en vir die eerste keer in jare dink hy daaraan om te bid. Nie hardop soos die gesin langs hulle nie. Maar in sy hart uit dankbaarheid vir alles wat God gedoen het, alles waarvoor Eric Hom sedert die dood van hulle dogtertjie nie gedank het nie.

Dit is te laat vir 'n informele gesprek met God – selfs al is dit net om dankie te sê. Sy en God se weë het al lank gelede geskei, en Eric twyfel of daar ooit versoening sal wees. Hy vaar buitendien heel goed sonder God. Hy is as't ware adjunk by een van die invloedrykste finansiële groepe in Manhattan, en het pas gehoor dat die pos van uitvoerende hoof vir hom in die vooruitsig is. 'n Beter huis, motor en spaarrekening as waarvan enigiemand van sy ouderdom kan droom.

En alles daarvan is 'n direkte weerspieëling van sy eie harde werk. As enigiemand 'n mosie van dank verdien, is dit hy, nie God nie.

Die gesin langs hulle eet klaar en vertrek terwyl Eric en Allen se maaltyd nog 'n halfuur voortsleep. Toe dit uiteindelik verby is, betaal Allen die rekening terwyl Eric sy derde glas wyn ledig. Dis meer as wat hy in maande, selfs jare gehad het. Sy kop suis, en 'n warm gevoel versprei deur hom toe hulle opstaan om te loop.

Eric kyk opsetlik nie na die kelnerin toe hulle die restaurant verlaat nie. Hy wil haar nie die verkeerde idee gee nie, want hy stel nie in die minste in haar belang nie. Laura is sy vrou, en hy sal nie agter haar rug met ander vroue uitgaan nie. Hulle het dalk nie 'n wonderlike verhouding nie, maar hy is nie van plan om sy lewe met 'n affair te kompliseer nie. Die idee hou vir hom geen bekoring in nie. Hy het 'n paar maande gelede by die Los Angeles-kantoor met Murphy daaroor gepraat.

"Het jy al opgemerk hoe 'n mens in ons soort werk ander dinge begin jaag?" Hulle het laat een aand vir die hysbak staan en wag.

"Ek weet wat jy bedoel," het Murphy gebrom.

“Toe ek jonger was, was dit liefde en seks.” Eric se oë het vernou. “Deesdae is dit mag en geld. Sukses. En weet jy wat?”

“Jy hou meer daarvan?”

“Vir seker.” Eric was eintlik onkant gevang deur die besef. “Ek is in beheer van die goed wat my lewe opwindend maak, niemand anders nie. Ek hou daarvan so.”

Die gesprek draai weer in Eric se kop terwyl hy en Allen in die hysbak is. Buitekant roep Allen ’n taxi en grinnik vir Eric. “Kom ek gaan wys jou ’n stukkie naglewe.”

Dis na tien en Eric is moeg. Dalk is dit die wyn, maar hy kan nie ophou dink aan die gesin van vroeër in die restaurant nie. “Nee, wat. Ek wil gaan inkruip.” ’n Huurmotor hou stil en Eric wys vir ’n ander taxi om stil te hou.

“Twee taxi’s dan.” Allen klim agterin die motor. “Sien jou môre. Agtuur.”

“Sien jou.” Eric se huurmotor hou stil toe Allen syne se deur toemaak.

Terug in die hotel oorweeg Eric dit om die televisie aan te skakel, maar besluit daarteen. Hy haat die televisie, beskou dit as ’n absolute vermorsing van sy tyd. En vanaand sal hy onmoontlik kan konsentreer. Nie omdat hy te veel gedrink het nie, maar omdat die toneeltjie van die gesin by die restaurant oor en oor voor hom afspeel. Die manier waarop die vrou se oë geglinster het toe sy haar man gesoen het, die sagte manier waarop hy aan sy dogtertjie se hand gevat het. Die humor en intimiteit en selfs die roetine om in ’n openbare plek te bid.

Was hy en Laura en Josh al ooit so? Die toonbeeld van ’n liefdevolle, goed aangepaste gesin? Het Laura hom al ooit so gesoen, salig gelukkig net om by hom te wees? Eric probeer onthou. Hulle moes mekaar tog seker in die een of ander stadium op daardie manier liefgehad het.

Hy hang sy baadjie in die kas op en stryk dit glad sodat dit nie gedurende die nag kreukel nie. ’n Kwartier later skakel hy die lig af en gaan sit-lê teen die kussings op sy bed. Hy is nie moeg genoeg om te slaap nie, en die stadsliggies skreef deur ’n spleet in die gordyne. Sy oë raak dof en toe hulle asof vanself toegaan, kom ’n herinnering uit sy en Laura se studentedae na hom toe terug. Hulle was albei uitgesproke oor hulle geloof, toegewyd aan God en vasbeslote om rein te bly totdat hulle getroud was.

Dis die rede waarom hulle in die paadjie afgestap het toe Laura maar agtien en net uit die skool was. Eric het destyds aan sy meestersgraad gewerk, en hulle geld was min. Toe sy ouers reël dat hulle in Eric se tante se gastehuis kon gaan bly, het hy en Laura die kans aangegryp. Die plekkie was klein, twintig vierkante meter maksimum. Dit het oud en muwwerig geruik en hulle het dit “die bunker” genoem. Wanneer hulle nie geslaap het of klas geloop het nie, het hulle die meeste van hulle tyd buite by ’n verweerde piekniektafel deurgebring. Hy het gewoonlik kitaar gespeel terwyl hulle tussenin oor hulle toekoms gesels het.

Die lewe was eenvoudig. Op een so ’n aand het Eric sy laaste liedjie klaar gesing, sy kitaar neergesit en na Laura oorgeleun. “Ek is mal oor sing.” Hy

het sy gesig nader aan Laura s'n gebring.

"Mmmm." Sy het haar oë gesluit. "En ek is mal daaroor om na jou te luister."

"Weet jy waarvan hou ek nog?" Hy het sy hand uitgesteek en die buitelyne van haar lippe nagegetrek.

"Die bunker?" Sy het gegiggel en haar neus het op 'n manier gekreukel wat hy haar nooit meer sien doen nie.

Hy het gewag totdat sy klaar gelag het. Toe het hy haar gesig tussen sy hande geneem en haar talmend gesoen. Toe hy haar laat gaan, het hy sy voorkop teen hare laat sak. "Nee, lawwe ding. Ek hou daarvan om by jou te wees. Ek hou van alles van jou." Hy het effens teruggesit en diep in haar oë gekyk. "Ek het jou lief, Laura."

Die herinnering is meteens so helder soos die toneeltjie vroeër die aand in die restaurant. Ja, Laura se oë hét geskitter. Nes dié van die vrou in die restaurant. Die herinnering vervaag effens en Eric probeer dink. Wat het daarna gebeur? Hy verbeel hom dit was iets belangriks. Iets waaraan hy dikwels teruggedink het totdat ... totdat hulle babadogtertjie dood is en die lewe op die een of ander manier platgeval het. Daarna was dit nie meer belangrik nie.

Hy maak sy oë oop en staar na die donker plafon. Die res van die herinnering kom stadigaan terug en hy maak sy oë weer toe. Laura het opgestaan en stadig in die rondte gedraai om na alles om haar te kyk – Eric ... sy kitaar ... die piekniektafel ... die bunker ... selfs die stoep met sy gekraakte sementvloer waar hulle soveel aande deurgebring het.

"Wat maak jy?" het hy geamuseerd gevra.

"Ek neem dit in." Sy het opgekyk en haar asem diep ingetrek. "Alles hiervan."

"Hiervan?" Eric het 'n kort laggie gegee. "Dié ou plekkie is niks." Hy het opgestaan en Laura in sy arms geneem. "Maar eendag, Laura, ek belowe jou eendag gaan ons alles hê." Hy het haar gelaatstrekke ingedrink. "Jy gaan soos 'n koningin lewe, soos jy verdien."

Laura het net geglimlag. "Jy verstaan nie."

"Wat?" Hy het haar oë probeer peil.

"Ek het alreeds alles. Maak nie saak hoeveel geld ons maak wanneer ons ouer is nie, jy is al wat ek nodig het, Eric. Jy en die Here." Sy het haar asem weer stadig ingetrek asof om die oomblik in haar binneste te bottel. "Niks in die wêreld kan my gelukkiger maak as wat ek nou is nie."

Die herinnering vervaag en hy maak sy oë weer oop. Hulle kyk instinktief na die wekker op die bedkassie. Dis na twaalf. Hy gaan nie deur môre kom as hy nie nou slaap nie. Maar die herinnering spook by hom. En op daardie oomblik, steeds halfdeurmekaar van die wyn, kom sy gesprek met Murphy weer by hom op. Die een oor mag en geld en sukses.

Hoe het hierdie dinge die plek geneem van dit wat hy en Laura daardie aand by die bunker gedeel het? En waarom het hy ophou kitaar speel? Die sagte refreine en aandwind het gerusstelend ineengevloei en hom laat voel dat die lewe mooi was. Sy kitaar was 'n manier waarop hy tot rus kon kom, op God en die mense in sy lewe kon fokus en nie net die aanloklike, allesoorheersende

drang om opgang te maak nie.

Vandag is dit al wat vir hom saak maak. Eric knip sy oë en draai op sy ander sy. Is dit regtig so verkeerd? Om anders te dink en op te tree as 'n dekade gelede?

Dit is nie dat hy van fisiese of emosionele liefde wil vergeet nie. Dis net dat daar nie tyd is nie. Toe hy en Laura jonk getroud was, het hulle geen tekort aan tyd gehad nie. Dit het deur die jare verander en dit maak die lewe vandag nie beter of slegter nie. Net anders. Buitendien, liefde kan wag; Laura is nêrens heen op pad nie. Sy en Josh sal daar wees wanneer hy die leer klaar geklim het en die pas kan markeer. Óf wanneer hy Grant se plek inneem, óf gouer, as hulle die regte rekeninge inpalm.

Tot tyd en wyl kom Laura niks kort nie. Trouens, as sy maar net om haar wil kyk soos daardie aand by die bunker, sal sy sien dat hy sy woord meer as gestand gedoen het. Daar staan 'n Cadillac in die motorhuis en hulle woon in 'n huis van vier-honderd-en-sestig vierkante meter in die mooiste deel van Westlake Village met 'n swembad en voltydse bediende. Hulle is lid van al die regte klubs en Josh is by die Westmont Academy ingeskryf, 'n elite Christenskool.

Laura is dalk nie vreeslik gelukkig nie, maar een ding staan vas: Sy lewe soos 'n koningin.

Hierdie feit is genoeg om Eric gerus te stel. Binne 'n kwessie van sekondes sak sy oë weer toe en hy voel hoe die slaap hom inhaal. Hy stil sy gewete met een laaste feit voordat hy heeltemal wegraak. Die lang ure wat hy by die werk deurbring, is vir Laura en Josh. En die liefde? Dit sal moet wag.

Hulle het oorgenoeg tyd.

# Chapter SEVEN

SEPTEMBER 10, 2001

Laura was trying to keep busy.

She and Josh had spent Saturday with friends and Sunday at church. Earlier that morning she'd volunteered in Josh's classroom, worked at the library fair after school, and met up with another Westmont family for dinner. As long as she was busy, she wouldn't have time to worry about her life, or the fact that her marriage barely had a pulse.

But now, at ten o'clock with Josh asleep down the hall, Laura lay wide awake in the dark, and the thoughts came unbidden. Somewhere out there under that same September sky, Eric was sound asleep in New York City. But was he alone? He spent more time away from home every year, and Laura had begun to wonder. Their physical relationship had been infrequent and hurried for years—more a release than a show of love. Even his declarations seemed shallow and contrived. Not the kind of sentiment that accompanied a lingering look or whispered words of passion.

Laura thought about that. Passion.

That's what was missing in her life. It was the thing that made divorce so appealing—the thought that someone else out there might be able to give her the passion she so badly missed. Laura's heart skittered into an irregular beat. It had done that off and on for the past eight years. But it was worse lately, and it meant sleep would be just about impossible.

She sat up and turned on the light. On nights like this peace came from just one source. She reached into the drawer of her nightstand and pulled out her worn blue leather Bible. Eric had bought it for her as a wedding present. Laura tried not to focus on the irony. It had been a decade since Eric had been remotely interested in Scripture. Since before her first pregnancy.

The pages were soft and thin, some crinkled from use more than

others. Philippians chapter four was that way—the entire section. Laura found the text she was looking for and let her eyes settle on the fourth verse.

*Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*

Laura read the passage again and again. She savored the part about God's peace guarding her heart and mind, and she felt the tension leave her arms and legs. Finally, even the pit in her stomach—the one that had been there since Josh's birthday last week—unwound and faded away.

Instead of falling asleep, Laura thought about the passion missing from her life. Eric had been passionate back then, hadn't he? Wasn't that what had attracted her to him in the first place? Those early days played again in Laura's mind like a movie she hadn't seen in years. Had she only been young and naïve? Or had Eric really been in love with her, really promised her he'd love her forever?

Suddenly, from the deepest part of her heart, memories began to surface. Memories she'd all but forgotten in the years since Eric graduated with his doctorate and took the job with Koppel and Grant.

For the first time in years, Laura didn't order the memories back where they belonged. Instead, she returned her Bible to the nightstand drawer, turned off the lights, and sat there in the dark, willing back everything about Eric Michaels and a love that began the fall of her junior year at Canoga Park High School.

Laura halted the memories for a moment. If she was going to go back, she might as well go all the way. Back to the summer of 1974, when she was just three years old. That was the year Laura was taken away from her parents and placed in a foster home. Laura didn't understand it at the time, but later she was shown copies of the court records.

Her parents had operated a methamphetamine lab in the backyard of their Topanga Canyon home, and four times they'd been arrested for making and selling illegal drugs. Always they paid fast-talking lawyers and were given stiff fines and another chance. But on the fifth arrest, the judge was finished with them. The two were given twenty years to life and sent to separate penitentiaries. Their parental rights to Laura were severed permanently, and she was put up for adoption within California's social services system.

Laura's foster parents applied to adopt her, but a year later, they divorced and changed their minds. Laura lived in a series of state homes until she was seven, when a family in Canoga Park, just west of Los Angeles, agreed to take Laura as part of a foster-adopt program.

The Paige family was large and multicultural with four birth children and four adopted—two Hispanic and two Romanian. Laura was the family's ninth child, but with so many children in the house, Laura rarely received one-on-one time with her adoptive parents. They were kind Christian people, but there was no getting around the camplike atmosphere that pervaded their home.

Years passed, and Laura Paige was a freshman at Canoga Park High School when she walked into second period health class and took the only empty seat in the room. Beside her, half-hidden behind a stack of books, was a blonde boy with glasses.

He poked his head around the stack and smiled at her. “Hi. Remember me?”

Laura had felt herself blush from the roots of her hair to below her neck. The boy looked familiar, but the two of them had never talked. And the teacher had already started talking.

When she said nothing, the boy continued. “I'm Clay Michaels. We're in leadership club together. Remember? At lunch the other day?”

Before she could answer, the teacher walked up to them. His eyes were narrow and angry. “There'll be no talking in class. Not now or at any



time during the school year.” He boomed the words and looked directly at Clay. “Is that understood?”

Clay's face had gone red. He slouched behind the books and leveled his gaze toward the front of the room. A few guys nearby shot him silent smirks. Laura dismissed the entire incident. She'd been a shy, academic girl who ran with the smart kids in Honor Society and after-school study sessions. The kids with a life outside the social circles at Canoga Park High. She had nothing more than a passing interest in boys—even one in leadership class.

Still, they had several classes together, and by the end of that year, Laura and Clay were friends. Sure, once in a while he'd pass her in the hallway and wave. But other than that he made no attempt to ask her out or make more of their friendship. That was fine with Laura. She knew there was nothing remarkable about her. She didn't bounce around the school giggling about Friday night football games. She had no desire whatsoever to be a cheerleader. Her single goal in life was to work hard enough to earn a scholarship to a local state college. Then maybe get a teaching credential and work with children.

Boys and dating and relationships could all wait. And when it was time, she doubted she'd fall in love with someone like Clay Michaels, someone shy and awkward who had never even made her heartbeat quicken. No, she'd find someone she felt passionate about, who would dote on her and treasure her and be her very own.

Someone who made her heart stand still. And that someone definitely wasn't Clay Michaels.

Then, in the fall of their junior year, things changed.

This time Laura and Clay shared a math class, and Laura began to notice something. Clay had changed. He was wearing contact lenses, and he'd not only gotten taller, but he'd filled out. He'd never been athletic in the years she'd known him, but that year he looked like he was lifting weights. And something else, something about the way he carried himself.

A confidence she hadn't noticed before.

At the end of the first week, when Clay suggested they study together, Laura's heart beat a bit faster than before.

Laura thought about it for a moment. "You mean here? After school?"

"No." The look in Clay's eyes was deeper than before. "I mean at my house." He shrugged. "I have a car. We could study together once a week, and I could give you a ride home."

"What's in it for me?" Laura was playing with him, but only in part. For the first time since she'd known him, she liked the idea of spending time with Clay Michaels. It sounded more fun than studying alone.

"For you?" Clay's mouth hung open. "Uh ...". He broke into a quick grin. "I'll make you laugh ... I'll sing and dance for you." His smile faded, and he tossed his hands in the air. "Ah, come on, Laura. We'll be better together."

Laura laughed at his pitiful expression. "Fine."

For eight weeks she and Clay spent Monday afternoons at his house working on math, and not once did Laura ever guess he had an older brother. The house was modest and sparsely decorated, and when Laura met Clay's mother, she was cordial but distant. Laura guessed something wasn't entirely right with Clay's family, but she didn't know him well enough to ask.

The one time she met Clay's father, she was struck by two main details. First, the man was strikingly handsome, and second, he was as nonverbal as his wife. Laura and Clay were finishing up a session of algebra when he opened the front door, hung his jacket in the closet, and turned to them.

"Clay." The man said, then he gave a single nod of his head. "I assume this is your study partner."

"Yes, Father." Clay stood and cast a nervous glance toward Laura. "This is Laura."

"Laura." Clay's father nodded again. "Nice to meet you."

"You too, sir." Laura remained seated and waited for him to approach Clay, hug him, or ask him about his day. The man did none of those things.

"Is he mad at you?" Laura whispered when Clay's father left the room and walked upstairs.

"Who?" A blank look fell across Clay's face. "My dad? No." He hesitated. "My parents have a lot on their minds."

"Is everything okay?" She hated asking.

Clay kept his voice barely more than a whisper. "They're getting divorced." He blinked, and a kind of raw pain filled his eyes that hadn't been there before. "It'll be final in a month."

"Oh." Laura bit her lip. "Sorry."

Clay shrugged. "That's okay." He managed a smile that didn't quite make it to his eyes. "Everyone thinks it'll be better when it's over."

The next week Laura met Eric.

She and Clay were working on a series of word problems when a young, handsome replica of Clay's father walked through the front door. Laura had a clear shot of him from her place at the dining room table, and her breath caught in her throat. Whoever he was, he waved at them and headed for the kitchen.

Clay caught her expression, and his smile fell just a notch. "Girls always act like that when they see Eric for the first time." He planted his elbows on the table and cocked his head. "Now, how come your eyebrows don't rise like that when I walk in the room?"

"Eric?"

"Yes." Clay set his pencil down. "He's a junior at Cal State Northridge, point guard for the basketball team, headed for USC business school when he graduates. He's also one of the top golfers at the school, and he'll have his doctorate before he's twenty-five—all of it on scholarship." Clay chuckled. "I've looked up to him since before I could walk."

They were still working on their last math problem when Eric

sauntered into the room and came up behind them. "Separate those last two numbers from the rest and make it a two-part problem. Once you've got answers for each part, divide the first part into the second."

"Actually," Laura slid her chair back and faced him, "once we have answers for both parts, we multiply the answers. The solution to a division problem involving fractions is always multiplication. Even in algebraic formulas."

Eric glanced at the problem in the book once more and then back at Laura. "I'm Eric." He held out his hand and smiled at her. "I don't believe we've met."

Laura was suddenly tongue-tied. "I ... I'm Laura Paige."

"Well ..." Eric gave Clay a lighthearted punch in the shoulder. "If you're dating my brother, you better be good to him."

Just as Laura was shaking her head, Clay slipped his arm around her shoulders. "She is." He shifted so that his eyes connected with hers. "She's great."

"That's good." He spoke to Clay, but his eyes never left hers. "Take care of her ... she's a good one."

Up close Eric was breathtaking, and Laura could barely focus on the conversation. Again she couldn't think of a thing to say, so she grinned like the ditzy girls at school. When Eric left the room, she slid her chair back up to the table. This time the blush felt like it went clear to her toes. The moment Eric was gone she realized something.

For just a moment, her heart had stood still.

Clay removed his arm from her shoulders and stared at her. "You like him."

Laura huffed and forced herself to shift gears. "What do you mean?"

"I mean," Clay directed his attention back to the math paper, "you like him."

"Yeah, and by the way what's the deal about us dating?"

"Well ..." Clay lifted his eyes to hers again. "We could be ..."

At that point Laura did something she hadn't thought of often through the years, something that stood out now as the single most vivid part of the memory.

She laughed.

Not a mean or mocking laugh, but a laugh that killed the idea of the two of them dating before it ever had a chance to take root. She still remembered the hurt that flashed in his eyes, a hurt that caught her off guard and made her scramble for something to say.

"Clay ... you can't be serious. We've been meeting all these weeks." She shook her head. "You never said anything like that before. I ... I thought you were joking."

For a moment she'd held Clay's expression, and she saw he was serious. That somehow along the course of Mondays, he'd fallen for her. But just as quickly, his guard was back up, and he stared at the math book once more. "You're right." He shrugged. "I'm just playing with you."

Before she left Clay's house that day, Laura went to the kitchen for a drink of water and saw Eric in the family room. He spotted her and motioned for her to come. Laura went to him, even though she felt she was somehow betraying Clay. Her heart skittered within her, and she could feel her eyes dance as she drew near to him.

When she was close enough, Eric leaned forward. "You aren't really dating Clay, are you?"

"No." She grinned. "He was teasing."

Eric leveled his gaze at her. "I wasn't." He sat a bit straighter on the sofa. "Go out with me, Laura. Come watch my basketball game this Friday."

Laura felt something strange in her gut. Why not? She and Clay were nothing more than studying partners. Distant friends at best. Still, she wasn't about to make it easy. Not for Eric or any boy. "I'm busy."

"Doing what?"

"Studying Friday night." She hesitated. "And on Saturday there's a

concert at church.”

“I’ll take you.” Eric practically jumped to his feet. “I love church concerts.”

A quiet laugh slipped from Laura's throat. “Fine.” She took a step backwards and told him her address. “Pick me up at seven.”

“Can we go out afterwards?”

She studied him for a moment, praying her attraction to him wouldn't show. “How old are you?”

“Twenty. How 'bout you?”

“Sixteen.” She smiled again. “Better count on just the concert. My dad will want to meet you before we go anywhere else.”

After that weekend there had been no turning back. She was Eric's girl from the moment he picked her up for the concert. Her adoptive father approved wholeheartedly, and they spent the next two school years together. They took trips to the LA Museum and discussed the lack of evidence supporting the theory of evolution. On weekends they held hands and walked barefoot along the shores of Malibu or Zuma Beach, spilling their most private secrets and savoring their time together.

“I love you,” he'd tell her. “I can't wait to make a life for you one day. A life better than either of us ever had.”

Dating Eric was the most amazing experience. Laura thought she'd died and gone to heaven. Eric was everything she'd ever wanted in a boyfriend, and when he proposed to her on Christmas Eve of her senior year in high school, she didn't hesitate for a moment. Her dreams of college and teaching paled in comparison to being Laura Michaels. Eighteen might have been too young for some girls, but not Laura. She'd been born old, and after a lifetime of wanting someone to love her all by herself, Laura was sure she'd found her dream man in Eric Michaels.

Clay took the news well, congratulating them and assuring Eric he couldn't be happier for him. But something sad had flickered in Clay's eyes when he turned to her and gave her a quick hug. Something that seemed

more pronounced now in the glow of so many years gone by.

But Laura never gave another thought to the passing interest she'd had in Clay in the weeks leading up to her meeting Eric. They were married that summer in a simple wedding attended by only fifty people, family and friends. But it was a day that felt ordained by God Himself. Laura floated out of the church and into the reception at a hotel banquet room.

"I can't give you much now," Eric told her later that night when they were alone. "But one day, Laura ... one day I'll give you everything you ever dreamed of. I promise."

Laura only kissed him and looked deep into his soul. "I already have it, Eric. I have you."

The cloud of memories lifted, and Laura nestled into her pillow. Her heart felt more hopeful for the time she'd spent in the past, the memories helping her forget, if just for one night, that Eric had found another love.

The love he had for Koppel and Grant.

That night she dreamed of her honeymoon, reliving every kiss, every intimate moment. But when she woke up the next morning, it only took a few seconds for reality to set in. She wasn't eighteen and in love with the most wonderful man in the world. She was thirty-two, and her husband barely talked to her. Indeed, she wouldn't spend the day frolicking on a Mexican beach and basking in the feel of Eric Michaels' arms.

She would spend it alone in her Westlake Village mansion, surrounded by memories and dying dreams, wondering again whether she'd chosen the wrong brother.

Reality was harsh after a night of dreaming. But there was no question about one thing. This wasn't the first day of her honeymoon. It was just a day that marked nothing more significant than the passing of time.

Just another Tuesday morning in the lonely life of Laura Michaels.

# Sewe

10 September 2001

Laura doen haar bes om besig te bly.

Sy en Josh het Saterdag by vriende gekuier en was Sondag kerk toe. Sy het vroeër vanoggend as vrywilliger by Josh se klas gaan help, na skool by die boekeskou gewerk en die aand saam met 'n ander gesin gaan uiteet. Solank sy besig bly, het sy nie tyd om haar oor haar lewe of haar amper lewelose huwelik te bekommer nie.

Maar nou dat Josh in die bed is en Laura wawyd wakker in die donker lê, het sy geen verweer teen die vrae nie. Iewers onder dieselfde Septemberhemel lê Eric vas aan die slaap in New York. Maar is hy alleen? Hy is elke jaar meer uitstedig en Laura het begin wonder. Hulle verkeer al vir jare selde intiem, en dan is dit eerder 'n fisiese ontlading as 'n uiting van hulle liefde. Selfs sy liefdesverklarings voel oppervlakkig en geforseerd. Sonder die soort sentiment wat deur 'n talmende kyk of intiem gefluisterde woorde vergesel word.

Laura dink vir 'n oomblik daaraan. Passie.

Dit is wat in haar lewe ontbreek. Dit is wat 'n egskending so aanloklik maak – die idee dat iemand anders haar die passie kan bied waarna sy so naarstig smag. Laura se hart begin onreëlmatig klop. Dit gebeur die afgelope agt jaar van tyd tot tyd. Maar deesdae is dit erger, en dit beteken dat sy onmoontlik nou aan die slaap gaan raak.

Sy sit regop en skakel die lig aan. Op sulke nagte is daar net een bron van vrede. Sy maak haar bedkassie oop en haal haar verslete leergebinde Bybel uit. Eric het dit as trougeskenk vir haar gekoop. Laura probeer om die ironie te ignoreer. Dit is nou tien jaar sedert Eric enige belangstelling in die Bybel getoon het. Voor haar eerste swangerskap.

Die bladsye is sag en dun, dié wat gereeld gelees word meer verkreukeld as ander. Onder andere Filippense hoofstuk vier – die hele gedeelte. Laura se oë val op die vierde vers.

*Wees altyd bly in die Here! Ek herhaal: Wees bly! Wees insiklik teenoor alle mense. Die Here is naby. Moet oor niks besorg wees nie, maar maak in alles julle begeertes deur gebed en smeking en met danksegging aan God bekend. En die vrede van God wat alle verstand te bowe gaan, sal oor julle harte en gedagtes die wag hou in Christus Jesus.*

Laura lees die gedeelte oor en oor. Sy voel gekoester in die belofte dat God se vrede haar hart en gedagtes sal bewaar, en voel hoe die spanning uit haar arms en bene vloei. Uiteindelik is dit asof selfs die knop op haar maag – wat sedert Josh se verjaarsdag verlede week daar is – ook skiet gee en wegsyfer.

Pleks daarvan om aan die slaap te raak, dink Laura aan die passie wat in haar lewe ontbreek. Sy onthou 'n Eric wat passie gehad het. Was dit nie daardie passie wat haar in die eerste plek na hom aangetrek het nie? Die beginjare speel in Laura se gedagtes af soos 'n rolprent wat sy in jare nie gesien het nie.



Was sy maar net jonk en naïef? Of het Eric haar regtig liefgehad, regtig belowe dat hy haar vir altyd sou liefhê?

Skielik begin ou herinneringe na die oppervlak kom. Herinneringe wat vergete geraak het sedert Eric sy doktorsgraad behaal het en by Koppel & Grant begin werk het.

Vir die eerste keer in jare laat Laura haar verlede toe om gesig te wys. Sy bêre die Bybel weer in die kassie, skakel die lig af en verwelkom die gedagtes aan Eric Michaels en 'n liefde wat in die herfs van haar junior jaar by Canoga Park High School begin het.

Laura bring haar gedagtes vir 'n oomblik tot stilstand. As sy moet teruggaan, kan sy netsowel by die heel begin begin. By die somer van 1974 toe sy drie jaar oud was. Dit was die jaar dat Laura van haar ouers weggeneem is en in pleegsorg geplaas is. Laura het dit nie verstaan nie, maar later is daar afskrifte van die hofverslae aan haar gewys.

Haar ouers het 'n metamfetamien-laboratorium in die agterplaas van hulle huis in Topanga Canyon gehad, en hulle is vier maal vir die maak en verkoop van onwettige dwelms gearresteer. Elke keer het hulle 'n gladdebek-advokaat betaal, en met 'n stewige boete en nog 'n kans weggekom. Maar teen die vyfde arrestasie het die regter genoeg gehad. Hulle het 'n vonnis van twintig jaar ontvang en is na verskillende gevangnisse gestuur. Hulle ouerlike regte is permanent van hulle af weggeneem en Laura is in pleegsorg geplaas.

Laura se pleegouers het aansoek gedoen om haar aan te neem, maar toe hulle 'n jaar later skei, het hulle van plan verander. Laura het tot op sewe in 'n rits kinderhuise gebly totdat 'n gesin in Canoga Park, net wes van Los Angeles, ingestem het om Laura as deel van 'n pleegsorg-aanneem-program in te neem. Die Paige-gesin was 'n groot en multikulturele gesin met vier biologiese en vier aangenome kinders – twee Spaans-Amerikaans en twee Roemeens. Laura was die gesin se negende kind, maar in so 'n groot gesin het Laura selde persoonlike aandag van haar aanneemouers ontvang. Hulle was opregte Christene, maar daar het 'n definitiewe kampatmosfeer in die huis geheers.

'n Paar jaar later was Laura Paige 'n groentjie in Canoga Park High School toe sy een oggend by die gesondheidsopvoedingsklas inloop en op die enigste beskikbare stoel in die vertrek gaan sit. Langs haar, half weggesteek agter 'n klomp boeke, het daar 'n blonde outjie met 'n bril gesit.

Hy het oor die stapel boeke geloer en vir haar geglimlag. “Haai. Onthou jy my?”

Laura het 'n bloedrooi gloed oor haar gesig voel versprei. Die seun het bekend gelyk, maar hulle het nog nooit gepraat nie. En die onderwyser het reeds begin praat.

Toe sy niks sê nie, het hy vervolg: “Ek is Clay Michaels. Ons is saam in die leierskapsklub. Onthou jy? Nou die dag in die etensuur.”

Voordat sy kon antwoord, het die onderwyser na hulle toe geloop. Sy oë was nou en kwaai. “Daar sal nie in hierdie klas gepraat word nie. Nie vandag of vir die res van die jaar nie.” Hy het die woorde uitgeblaf en reguit na Clay

gekyk. “Verstaan?”

Clay het dieprooi gebloos. Hy het hom kleingemaak agter die boeke en reguit voor hom gekyk. ’n Paar ouens het smalend vir hom geglimlag. Laura het die hele insident van haar laat afrol. Sy was ’n skaam, akademiesgerigte meisie wat saam met die begaafde kinders aan die Ere-vereniging behoort het en naskoolse studiesessies bygewoon het. Die kinders met ’n lewe buite die sosiale kringe in Canoga Park High. Haar belangstelling in seuns was net vlietend – selfs een wat saam met haar in die leiersklas was.

Hulle het egter ’n paar klasse saam gehad, en teen die einde van daardie jaar was Laura en Clay vriende. Buiten om nou en dan vir haar te waai wanneer hulle in die gang verby mekaar loop, het hy nooit ’n poging aangewend om haar uit te vra of iets meer van hulle vriendskap te maak nie. Dit het Laura gepas. Sy het geweet daar is niks besonders aan haar nie. Sy het nie saam met die ander meisies oor die naweek se voetbal gegiggel nie. Sy het hoegenaamd geen begeerte gehad om ’n rasieler te wees nie. Haar enigste doel was om hard genoeg te werk om ’n beurs by ’n plaaslike universiteit te ontvang. Daarna dalk ’n onderwysdiploma te kry en met kinders te werk. Kêrels en afsprake en verhoudings kon wag. En wanneer die tyd sou kom, het sy getwyfel of sy vir iemand soos Clay Michaels sou val, ’n skaam en onbeholpe ou wat haar hart nog nooit vinniger laat klop het nie. Nee, dit sou iemand wees oor wie sy passievol is, iemand wat versot op haar is, haar sou koester en haar eie sou wees.

Iemand wat haar hart sou steel. En daardie iemand was definitief nie Clay Michaels nie.

In die herfs van haar junior jaar het dinge verander.

Laura en Clay was in dieselfde wiskundeklas, en Laura het met nuwe oë na hom begin kyk. Clay het verander. Sy bril is met kontaklense vervang en hy was nie net langer nie, maar ook frisser. Hy was nooit atleties nie, maar daardie jaar het dit begin lyk asof hy met gewigte oefen. En daar was nog iets, iets aan sy houding. ’n Selfversekerdheid wat sy nie voorheen opgemerk het nie.

Toe Clay aan die einde van die eerste week voorstel dat hulle saam studeer, het Laura se hart ’n bietjie vinniger as voorheen geklop.

Laura het ’n oomblik daaroor nagedink. “Bedoel jy hier? Na skool?”

“Nee.” Die kyk in Clay se oë was dieper as voorheen. “Ek bedoel by my huis.” Hy het sy skouers opgehaal. “Ek het ’n kar. Ons kan een keer ’n week saam leer, en ek kan jou by die huis gaan aflaai.”

“En wat kry ek daaruit?” Laura het hom geterg, maar nie sonder ’n tikkie erns nie. Vandat sy hom ken, klink dit vir die eerste keer halfaanloklik om ’n middag saam met Clay Michaels deur te bring. Dit sal lekkerder wees as om alleen te moet leer.

“Jy?” Clay se mond het oopgehang. “Um ... ” Hy het ’n vinnige laggie gegee. “Ek sal jou laat lag ... ek sal vir jou sing en dans.” Sy glimlag het vervaag en hy het sy hande in die lug gegooi. “Ag, kom nou, Laura. Ons sal beter vaar as

ons twee is.”

Sy jammerlike uitdrukking het Laura laat lag. “Nou goed.”

Sy en Clay het agt weke elke Maandagmiddag by sy huis sit en wiskunde doen, en Laura het nooit kon raai dat hy ’n ouer broer het nie. Die huis was beskeie ingerig, en toe Laura Clay se ma ontmoet, was sy vriendelik maar afsydig. Laura het vermoed dat daar iewers iets in die gesin geskort het, maar sy het Clay nie goed genoeg geken om te vra nie.

Die dag toe sy Clay se pa ontmoet, is sy deur twee dinge getref. Eerstens was die man besonder aantreklik, en tweedens was hy net so nieverbaal soos sy vrou. Laura en Clay was besig om hulle algebraboeke toe te maak toe hy die voordeur oopmaak, sy baadjie in die kas ophang en na hulle draai.

“Clay,” het die man gesê en lig geknik. “Ek neem aan dis jou studiemaat.”

“Ja, Pa.” Clay het opgestaan en halfsenuweeagtig na Laura gekyk. “Dis Laura.”

“Laura.” Clay se pa het weer geknik. “Gaaf om jou te ontmoet.”

“U ook, Meneer.” Laura het bly sit en gewag dat die man na Clay toe moet kom, hom ’n druk moet gee en oor sy dag uitvra. Maar dit het nie gebeur nie.

“Is hy kwaad vir jou?” het Laura gefluister toe Clay se pa met die trap op is.

“Wie?” Clay se gesig was uitdrukkingloos. “My pa? Nee.” Hy het stilgebly.

“My ouers gaan deur ’n moeilike tyd.”

“Is alles reg?” Sy het dit gehaat om te vra.

Clay se stem was skaars meer as ’n fluistering. “Hulle is besig om te skei.” Hy het sy oë geknip en daar was ’n soort rou pyn wat sy nog nie gesien het nie.

“Oor ’n maand sal alles verby wees.”

“O.” Laura het haar lip vasgebyt. “Jammer.”

Clay het sy skouers opgehaal. “Dis oukei.” Sy halwe glimlag het nie sy oë bereik nie. “Almal sê dit sal beter wees as alles eers verby is.”

Die volgende week het Laura Eric ontmoet.

Sy en Clay het aan ’n reeks woordprobleme gewerk toe ’n jong, aantreklike replika van Clay se pa by die voordeur inkom. Laura kon hom duidelik sien van waar sy aan die etenstafel gesit het, en het na asem gesnak. Die ou het vir hulle gewuif en kombuis toe geloop.

Clay het haar uitdrukking raakgesien en sy gesig het net ’n aks geval. “Dit gebeur altyd wanneer ’n meisie Eric vir die eerste keer sien.” Hy het sy elmboë op die tafel geplant en sy kop skeef gehou. “Nou vir wat skiet jou wenkbroue nie so op as ek by die deur inkom nie?”

“Eric?”

“Ja.” Clay het sy potlood neergesit. “Hy is ’n junior by Cal State Northridge, verdediger vir die basketbalspan, en wil sakebestuur gaan swot wanneer hy klaarmaak. Hy is ook een van die topgholfspelers in die skool, en hy sal ’n doktorsgraad hê voor hy vyf-en-twintig is – alles met ’n beurs.” Clay het ’n laggie gegee. “Ek kyk al van my tjokkertjie-dae af op na hom.”

Hulle was besig met hulle laaste wiskundeprobleem toe Eric ingedrentel kom en agter hulle kom staan. “Vat daardie twee laaste getalle en maak twee

somme daarvan. As jy albei antwoorde het, deel die eerste deel in die tweede.”

Laura het haar stoel teruggestoot en na hom gedraai. “Eintlik moet die twee antwoorde vermenigvuldig word. Die oplossing op ’n deelsom met breuke is altyd vermenigvuldiging. Selfs in algebraïese formules.”

Eric het weer na die som en toe na Laura gekyk. “Ek’s Eric.” Hy het sy hand uitgesteek en vir haar geglimlag. “Ek dink nie ons het al ontmoet nie.”

Laura het skielik haar tong ingesluk. “Ek ... ek’s Laura.”

“Nou ja ... ” Eric het Clay ’n ligte vuishou op die skouer gegee. “As jy met my broer uitgaan, hoop ek jy is goed vir hom.”

Net toe Laura haar kop skud, sit Clay sy arm om haar skouers. “Sy is.” Hy draai toe effens sodat hy in haar oë kyk. “Sy’s wonderlik.”

“Dis goed.” Hy het met Clay gepraat, maar sy oë het in hare gebly. “Kyk mooi na haar ... sy’s oulik.”

Van naby het Eric haar asem weggeslaan, en Laura kon skaars op die gesprek konsentreer. Sy kon weer aan niks dink om te sê nie, toe grinnik sy maar soos die bakvissies by die skool. Nadat Eric uit is, het sy haar stoel teruggeskuif. Hierdie keer het dit gevoel asof sy tot in haar tone bloos. Die oomblik toe Eric weg is, het sy iets besef.

Vir net ’n oomblik het haar hart stilgestaan.

Clay het sy arm van haar skouers afgehaal en na haar gekyk. “Jy hou van hom.”

Laura het ’n ergerlike geluid gemaak en haar reggeruk. “Wat bedoel jy?”

“Ek bedoel,” Clay het sy aandag weer by die wiskundesom bepaal, “jy hou van hom.”

“Goed, en as ek mag vra, van wanneer af gaan ons uit?”

“Wel ... ” Clay het weer na haar gekyk. “Dis seker nie so vergesog nie ... ”

Toe het Laura iets gedoen waaraan sy deur die jare nie baie gedink het nie, iets wat sy nou baie helder onthou.

Sy het gelag.

Dit was nie ’n snedige of spottende lag nie, maar ’n lag wat enige idee van ’n verhouding in die kiem gesmoor het. Sy onthou nog die pyn wat in sy oë geflits het, ’n pyn wat haar onkant gevang het en haar haastig na woorde laat soek het.

“Clay ... jy is tog nie ernstig nie. Ons werk nou al weke lank saam.” Sy het haar kop geskud. “Jy het nog nooit so iets gesê nie. Ek ... ek’t gedink jy maak ’n grap.”

Sy het Clay se oë ’n oomblik langer vasgehou, en gesien dat hy ernstig was. Dat hy iewers deur die loop van die Maandae op haar verlief geraak het. Maar hy het hom vinnig reggeruk en weer na die wiskundeboek gekyk. “Jy’s reg.” Hy het sy skouers opgehaal. “Ek’t net gespeel.”

Voordat sy daardie dag huis toe is, het Laura ’n glas water in die kombuis gaan haal en Eric in die woonkamer opgemerk. Hy het haar raakgesien en beduie dat sy na hom toe moes kom. Laura het na hom toe geloop en die

gevoel afgeskud dat sy Clay op die een of ander manier verraaï. Haar hart het gebons en sy kon voel hoe haar oë dans toe sy naderloop.

Toe sy voor hom staan, het Eric vorentoe geleun. “Jy is nie regtig Clay se meisie nie, nê?”

“Nee.” Sy het geglimlag. “Hy het net geterg.”

Eric het reguit na haar gekyk. “Ek het nie.” Hy het skielik regop gesit. “Ek wil jou uitvra, Laura. Kom kyk as ek Vrydagaand basketbal speel.”

Laura het iets vreemds op haar maag gevoel. Hoekom nie? Sy en Clay is niks meer as studiemats nie. Nie veel meer as kennisse nie. Nietemin, sy is nie van plan om dit maklik te maak nie. Nie vir Eric of enige ander ou nie. “Ek’s besig.”

“Waarmee?”

“Ek moet Vrydagaand leer.” Sy het geaarsel. “En Saterdag is daar ’n konsert by die kerk.”

“Ek sal jou vat.” Eric het so te sê opgespring. “Ek’s mal oor kerkkonserte.”

Sy het ’n sagte laggie gegee. “Nou goed.” Sy het effens weggestaan en haar adres vir hom gegee. “Jy kan my seweur kom oplaai.”

“Kan ons na die tyd iewers heen gaan?”

Sy het hom vir ’n oomblik bestudeer en gebid dat hy nie haar aangetrokkenheid kon sien nie. “Hoe oud is jy?”

“Twintig. En jy?”

“Sestien.” Sy het weer geglimlag. “Hou dit maar eers net by die konsert. My pa sal jou wil ontmoet voordat ons enigiets anders doen.”

Na daardie naweek was hulle by omdraai verby. Sy het Eric se meisie geword die oomblik toe hy haar vir die konsert kom oplaai het. Haar aanneem-pa het hulle sy goedkeuring gegee en vir die volgende twee jaar op skool was hulle ou en meisie. Hulle het saam na die Los Angeles-museum toe gegaan en die gebrekkige bewyse vir die evolusieteorie bespreek. Naweke het hulle hand aan hand op die strand gaan stap en hulle diepste geheime gedeel. Hulle het hulle tyd saam gekoester.

“Ek is lief vir jou,” het hy vir haar gesê. “Ek ek kan nie wag om eendag vir jou ’n lewe te gee nie. ’n Beter lewe as wat ek of jy ooit gehad het.”

Haar verhouding met Eric was iets ongeloofliks. Dit het vir Laura gevoel asof sy reguit hemel toe is. Eric was alles wat sy ooit in ’n man wou hê, en toe hy haar die Oukersaand van haar laaste skooljaar vra om te trou, het sy nie vir ’n oomblik gehuiwer nie. Haar drome van universiteit en onderwys het nie vergelyk met die vooruitsig om Laura Michaels te wees nie. Agtien sou dalk te jonk wees vir sekere meisies, maar nie vir Laura nie. Sy is oud gebore, en na ’n lewenslange verlange na iemand om as haar eie lief te hê, was Laura daarvan oortuig dat sy haar droomman in Eric Michaels ontdek het.

Clay het die nuus goed ontvang, hulle gelukgewens en Eric verseker dat hy saam met hom bly was. Maar daar was ’n hartseer flikkering in Clay se oë toe hy na haar draai en haar ’n vinnige drukkie gee. Nou is dit asof sy dit in die gloed van soveel vergange jare baie duideliker sien.

Maar Laura het nooit weer teruggedink aan haar vlietende belangstelling in Clay in die weke net voordat sy Eric ontmoet het nie. Hulle het 'n somertroue gehad wat deur net vyftig gaste, familie en vriende bygewoon is. Maar dit was asof die dag 'n geskenk van God self was. Ná die seremonie het Laura swewend by die onthaal aangekom.

“Op die oomblik kan ek jou nie veel gee nie,” het Eric later die aand vir haar gesê toe hulle alleen was. “Maar eendag, Laura ... eendag gaan ek jou alles gee waarvan jy ooit gedroom het. Ek belowe.”

Laura het hom net gesoen en diep in sy oë gekyk. “Ek het dit reeds, Eric. Ek het vir jou.”

Die herinneringe vervaag en Laura skuif af en laat sak haar kop op die kussing. Die tydjie wat sy in die verlede deurgebring het, het haar laat moed skep. Dis asof die herinneringe haar, al is dit net vir een nag, help vergeet dat Eric 'n ander liefde gevind het.

Sy liefde vir Koppel & Grant.

Daardie nag droom sy van haar wittebrood, herleef sy elke soen en elke intieme oomblik. Maar toe sy die volgende oggend wakker word, duur dit net 'n paar sekondes voordat die werklikheid haar inhaal. Sy is nie agtien en op die wonderlikste man in die wêreld verlief nie. Sy is twee-en-dertig, en haar man praat skaars met haar. Sy en Eric gaan nie die dag op 'n Mexikaanse strand deurbring en hulle in mekaar se arms verloor nie.

Sy gaan vandag in haar herehuis in Westlake Village deurbring, alleen en omring deur herinneringe en verpletterde drome. Sy sal opnuut wonder of sy die verkeerde broer gekies het.

Die realiteit is ongenaakbaar. Maar van een ding is sy seker. Dit is nie die eerste dag van haar wittebrood nie. Dit is net nog 'n vier-en-twintiguur-gleuf op die kalender.

Net nog 'n Dinsdagoggend in die eensame lewe van Laura Michaels.

# Chapter EIGHT

SEPTEMBER 11, 2001, 6 A.M.

Jake's Bible verse that day was from Proverbs.

*Lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight.*

He read the words, underlined them, and read them again. Wasn't that exactly where Jamie was at? If only she could stop leaning on her own understanding and start leaning on God. He would make her paths straight. He'd take away her fear and help her feel safe about loving him. People had misjudged Jamie over the years, taken her as unbending and cold. A person with little love to give.

Jake's cousin had thought that of Jamie. "She's so competitive, Jake. There's nothing soft about her."

But the cousin couldn't have been more wrong. Jamie had a world of love inside her, too much love, maybe. So much that it scared her, frightened her into thinking something would somehow come along to steal that love away. No, there wasn't any limit to Jamie's love. The hard part was making her feel safe enough to give it away, safe enough to stop running.

And really, it all came down to the message in that single verse from Proverbs. If Jamie would lean on God, He'd take care of the rest. In the margins next to the verse, Jake scribbled, *Jamie ... this verse is for you, honey.*

He did that often, though he never showed her what he'd written. The first hour of his morning was between him and the Lord. He would read a little from his Bible, underline a few key verses, and jot notes in the margins. Then he'd write a page or two in his journal.

One day in the not-too-distant future, when Jamie might show even a little interest, Jake would bring out the Bible and the journal and let her

read both. He had nothing to hide. The material was simply an accounting of the walk he'd shared with God since he and Jamie had married seven years earlier. It was something he looked back on every now and then as a way of charting how far he'd come, a way of remembering what was important.

Jake glanced at Jamie, cuddled up beside him, sleeping. She looked young and vulnerable, without the armor she typically wore when she was awake. In this light the resemblance between her and Sierra was striking.

He sighed and stared at her a moment longer. No question about it, he was the luckiest man in the world. A beautiful wife who just happened to be his best friend ... and a daughter who was at least half angel. *Thank you so much, God ... every day with them is a miracle.*

The numbers on Jake's bedside clock changed, and he tore his eyes away from Jamie. He needed to finish, or he wouldn't get to work on time. The shift began at nine o'clock, but he would arrive no later than eight. It usually took an hour for the night shift to debrief them on the incidents that had occurred while Manhattan slept.

Jake opened his journal and began to write. A restlessness stirred within him, something Jake couldn't quite define. This time he didn't make references to the Bible text and how it applied to his life. He wrote a letter to Jamie.

*Dear sweet Jamie,*

*I have this feeling, deep in my heart, that something's about to change for me and you. Maybe it's your questions about church or the way you seem to hang on to Sierra's Bible stories a little bit longer these days. Whatever it is, I've prayed for God to touch your heart, baby. He means everything to me, and I know that one day He'll mean everything to you too. On that day, you'll no longer have to be afraid, because you'll have God Almighty to lean on. I want you to know, honey, that when you find that precious faith, I'll be smiling bigger than you've ever seen me smile. Because the thing I want even more than your love is the knowledge that*



*we'll have eternity together.*

*I simply cannot bear the idea of being in heaven without you. I love you too much to lose you.*

Jake kept writing until he'd filled almost two pages. Then he closed the journal, closed the Bible, and slipped them both beneath the bed. He leaned down and nuzzled his face against hers. "I love you ..." His whispered words caused her to stir, and slowly she opened her eyes.

"Mmmm." She pulled her arms from under the sheets and caught the back of Jake's head. "C'mere."

Jake grinned. "Gladly." He positioned himself partway over her body and kissed her more fully this time. When he drew back, desire burned in both their eyes. "You're gorgeous, you know that?"

"Not as much as you." She kissed him again and moved the covers off her pajama-clad body. "Come back to bed."

"Don't tempt me." Jake could feel his body responding to hers, and for a moment he considered it. Then he kissed her once more and sat up. "I need to shower. Shift change is in an hour."

"Oh, Jake, come on." Jamie sat up and worked her hands along the sides of his naked chest. "Call in sick. It's a beautiful day. We'll play under the covers for an hour and take Sierra to the zoo."

Most workdays Jamie barely woke up to tell him good-bye, and so her request was almost too much to pass up. He eased her back onto the bed, gave her a series of kisses, and then forced himself onto his feet. "One of the day guys is sick this week." He brushed a lock of dark hair off her forehead. "Otherwise I would." He looked out the window. "Besides, the good weather is supposed to last."

"Next week, then?"

He grinned and stretched. "Okay, next week. Unless someone else gets sick." He turned toward the bathroom, his tone still filled with the passion he felt for her. "I better shower."

"Okay." Jamie exhaled her disappointment. "But, Jake, one thing."

He stopped. “What?”

“About that shower ...” A grin filled her face. “Make it a cold one.”

Thirty minutes later, Jake was dressed in his work uniform—black pants, a white T-shirt and short-sleeve buttoned-down, black socks, and comfortable dress shoes. His turnouts—the uniform he wore for fighting fires—stayed at the station near the rig. Ready at a moment's notice whenever they got a call.

He kissed Jamie one last time. “See you tonight.”

“Chinese food?”

“Mmmm.” He started to smile but changed his mind. “Wait ... are you cooking?”

She giggled and placed the palm of her hand against his chest, pushing him playfully away from her. “Go to work, you big oaf. I can cook Chinese food just fine.”

“Okay.” He took a step toward the door and raised an eyebrow. “But keep the takeout number handy. Just in case.”

Her laughter faded. “Hey.”

“Yeah?” He spun around, and his eyes found hers. The connection between them was as deep as it was instant.

“Be careful.”

He winked at her. “You know it, Jamie. I love you.”

“Love you too.”

Before he left, he stopped by Sierra's room.

She was up, moving about near her closet. So far she'd managed to pull on pink leggings and a blue-and-red-striped shirt. At age five, dressing herself was the ultimate in independence and proof, if nothing else, that she was Jamie's daughter. She saw Jake and ran to him, hugging his legs tight, and stirring feelings in his heart that made a day at the zoo sound wonderful.

He swept her into a full hug and then set her down again. “Isn't this pretty, Daddy?” She did a twirl. “Mommy says I have to pick colors that go

together. Pink, red, and blue go together, right?"

Jake bit his lip. "Right, baby. Definitely." He crouched down and rubbed noses with her. "Daddy's running late, honey. See you after work, okay?"

"Butterfly kisses first." She moved her face so that their noses rubbed together, then she turned her face a few inches, and at the same time they brushed their eyelashes against each other's cheeks. She pulled back and grinned at him. "There. Now you can go."

"Be good." He hugged her once more. "And don't forget to pray to Jesus."

"Okay, Daddy. I love you."

"Love you too, sweetie." He stood and blew her a kiss.

She pretended to catch it in the air and place it over her heart. Then she blew one in his direction. Jake grabbed at a handful of air. "Caught it!" He brought his fist to his chest. "Forever and always."

"Forever and always!" Sierra clapped and jumped up and down. "Bye, Daddy."

"Bye, honey. We'll play horsie when I get home."

Jake's commute was tedious, but he could've done it in his sleep. Surface streets to the Staten Island Express. Ten minutes to the ferry parking lots. Depending on the shift, some days he'd drive his pickup into the city and park outside the station. But over the last few years he'd pulled mostly days. At this hour it would be impossible to find a spot, so he stood in the line for walk-ons and paid his fare.

Usually he preferred an inside seat because of the fog or cool weather. But this morning was particularly gorgeous. Blue skies as far as he could see and the city skyline stretching out before him like a surreal postcard. He liked the ferry, liked the way it made the commute seem less frantic.

Jake moved on and took a seat near the front.

Days like this made it easy to see why his father had settled their family in New York City, why the old man had chosen a crazy busy place

like FDNY to fight fires. Manhattan pulsed with life and energy, each building in the skyline standing at attention while the activity in it raced at breakneck speeds. Every financial power in the world stepped back and watched in awe as New York City did her thing.

His father could have chosen any one of a thousand small towns across America. Places where a house fire was big news and most days were a series of paramedic runs and training drills. But Jake was grateful his father had opted for what they both thought was the greatest fire-fighting challenge of all—Manhattan.

The ferry pulled in, and Jake took a series of subway trains to a set of stairs just half a block from the station. Engine 57 had operated out of this same stone building for seventy years. His father had never worked Engine 57, but he'd split time at two nearby stations.

He entered through the station's front door and immediately saw Larry smile at him from one of the picnic tables lining the dining room wall. "You're late, JB."

The guys at the station never called him Jake Bryan. He was JB. Jake glanced at an old clock that hung over the kitchen sink. "Eight-oh-one isn't late, Larry Boy. It's fashionable."

"You're usually early."

"So ..." Jake made his way to the table.

"Jamie kept you." It wasn't a question. Larry shot a smirk at him and stuffed half a blueberry muffin into his mouth. He followed it with a swig of coffee.

"It's not so bad, Larry Boy." Jake grinned and took a seat across from his friend. "A few fashionable mornings might be good for you and Sue."

"And a cup of coffee might be good for you." He stood, crossed the dining room, and filled a paper cup with chunky black liquid from the bottom of the coffeemaker. "Here." He set the cup down in front of Jake. "Be careful. You might need a spoon."

"Thanks." Jake lifted the cup to his nose and breathed in the steam.

Larry sat back down. "Doesn't sound like the night shift had much."

One at a time the night crew guys joined them at the tables, pounding down muffins and coffee and an occasional piece of fruit. Maxwell was in charge that day. He stood with his back against the chipped kitchen counter and called the meeting to order. "Just a few calls to go over." He glanced at a clipboard in his hands. "A car fire a block south of Forty-Second needs some follow-up. Owner says it was arson."

Maxwell touched on a few more items, then crossed the kitchen and started a fresh pot of coffee. He glanced at the guys from night crew. "Anything else?"

A few firefighters made suggestions, and another reminded Maxwell of an unfinished incident from the weekend. Conversation was comfortable and casual for the next half hour, the way it always was during shift change. The station had two probies, but otherwise the firefighters from Engine 57 and Ladder 96 had worked together long enough to be family. The station was manned by thirty-six men, enough for three shifts, and each thought of the station as their second home. During downtime they cooked steaks, cleaned the kitchen, and offered advice to whichever of them was struggling at home.

On a call they were tighter than brothers.

"You with us today, JB?" Maxwell raised his eyes in Jake's direction. "I asked which of the day guys did follow-up on the warehouse fire from the weekend."

Jake straightened himself and tried to focus. Maxwell wasn't angry, but he wanted an answer. Before Jake could think of one, Larry cut in. "JB's distracted." He snickered and poked an elbow at the man beside him. "Too much morning time with that pretty wife of his."

"Or not enough." Jake whispered the retort and at the same time turned his attention fully to Maxwell. The man was a veteran, a captain with twenty years experience in the department. Jake cleared his throat. "I worked the report, sir. No surprises. A few more phone calls today, and we

should be ready to file.”

Each call required a report. Some were simple and could be done minutes after a run. Others took longer and depended on interviews from outside sources or investigative work before a cause of a fire could be determined, and arrests possibly made.

Maxwell was about to say something when the rumbling of a large airplane overhead stopped him. Because of the World Trade Center, jets had to observe strict guidelines about staying away from Manhattan. To a man, the firefighters around the table looked up.

“That’s too low ...” Jake muttered. But before anyone had a chance to respond, a muffled explosion pierced the quiet morning, and the ground vibrated beneath their feet.

Maxwell darted for the station door with Jake and the others close behind. The scene outside made them stop and stare in horror. Massive flames and sections of building were exploding from the upper section of one of the World Trade Center buildings. Jake stared at the billowing black smoke, and his eyes grew wide. *Dear God ... no ... it can't be ...*

Around him, for a split second, all of New York City seemed to hold its breath, as though the disaster they were witnessing was too awful to believe. Cars pulled off to the side of the road at bizarre angles, pedestrians stopped and looked straight up, their mouths open. In an instant the air was pierced by screams and shouts. Across the street two old women held each other and began to cry.

A man a few yards away looked from the flaming Twin Tower to the cluster of firefighters. “The plane ... it went into the building!” Then he began to run, unfazed by the papers flying out of his attaché case.

Jake’s heart was pounding. A plane had crashed into the World Trade Center? It was impossible, the devastation he was watching too overwhelming. A fifty-foot-high ball of fire and smoke shot out from high up in the tower. It was the most horrific thing Jake had ever seen.

New York City firefighters liked to talk about the big one, the fire of

all fires that would bring every one of them out of their stations to fight it. “See you at the big one” was a sentiment casually tossed about at most New York firehouses. Jake's was no exception. He squinted, unable to believe the magnitude of the blaze. How in the world had the pilot made such an error? Couldn't he have dropped a doomed jet into the harbor or struggled to land in some sort of treed area?

And how were they ever going to fight a fire that size so many floors off the ground?

An awful thought flashed through Jake's mind. What if the plane had been a passenger jet? One with a hundred people aboard? He shuddered as he realized something else. It didn't matter whether it was a passenger jet or not—either way they'd be dealing with massive loss of life. An MCI ... massive casualty incident. A fire that intense would mean the deaths of everyone on the plane, and perhaps several hundred businesspeople.

Maybe more.

These thoughts—all of them—flashed through Jake's mind in as much time as it took him to blink twice. Adrenaline rushed through his bloodstream. People were in trouble, thousands of them. Every instinct in him wanted to race down the firehouse stairs, jump into his uniform, and fly to the fire.

But before he could move, the group's silent shock was interrupted by Maxwell's voice—calm and steady.

“All right, men. Get dressed. We might not be first called, but we'll be on the list.” Without saying a word, they hurried into the station garage. They were halfway down the stairs when Maxwell stopped and faced them once more. “I'm not much of a praying man, but right now every one of you should say your prayers.” He gazed again at the blazing World Trade Center. “A lot of people are gonna' die today.”

11 September 2001 06:00

Jake se Bybelvers kom daardie dag uit Spreuke.

*Moenie op jou eie insigte staatmaak nie. Ken Hom in alles wat jy doen en Hy sal jou die regte pad laat loop.*

Nadat hy dit gelees het, onderstreep hy die woorde en lees dit weer. Is dit nie presies waar Jamie haar bevind nie? As sy maar net wil ophou om op haar eie insig staat te maak en op God te steun. Hy sal haar paaie gelykmaak. Hy sal haar vrees wegneem sodat sy nie bang sal wees om hom lief te hê nie. Deur die jare het baie mense Jamie verkeerd beoordeel, en haar as 'n afsydige, koue persoon opgesom. Iemand wat nie baie liefde het om te gee nie.

Dit is wat Jake se niggie van Jamie gedink het. "Sy is so kompetend, Jake. Daar is niks sags aan haar nie."

Maar die niggie het dit totaal verkeerd gehad. Jamie het 'n see van liefde binne haar, te veel dalk. Sóveel dat dit haar bangmaak, laat vrees dat iets op die een of ander manier sal kom om daardie liefde te steel. Nee, Jamie het geen tekort aan liefde nie. Die probleem is om haar veilig genoeg te laat voel om dit weg te gee, veilig genoeg om op te hou vlug.

Uiteindelik kom dit alles neer op hierdie vers uit Spreuke. As Jamie op die Here sal staatmaak, sal Hy vir die res sorg. In die kantlyn langs die vers skryf Jake: *Jamie ... dis jou vers, my lief.*

Hy doen dit gereeld, maar wys haar nooit wat hy geskryf het nie. Die eerste uur van sy oggend is tussen hom en die Here. Hy lees 'n stukkie uit sy Bybel, onderstreep 'n paar belangrike verse, en maak 'n aantekening of wat in die kantlyn. Toe skryf hy 'n bladsy of twee in sy dagboek.

Wanneer Jamie op 'n dag in die toekoms 'n bietjie belangstelling toon, sal Jake sy Bybel en dagboek uithaal en haar albei laat lees. Hy het niks om weg te steek nie. Dis bloot 'n verslag van die pad wat hy met die Here gestap het sedert hy en Jamie sewe jaar gelede getrou het. Dis iets waarop hy elke nou en dan terugkyk as 'n manier om te sien tot waar hy gekom het, 'n manier om te onthou wat belangrik is.

Jake kyk na Jamie wat langs hom lê en slaap. Sy lyk jonk en weerloos so sonder die pantser wat sy gewoonlik aanhet wanneer sy wakker is. Soos sy nou hier lê, lyk sy en Sierra ontsettend baie na mekaar.

Hy sug en kyk nog 'n oomblik na haar. Hy is die gelukkigste man op aarde. 'n Beeldskone vrou wat ook sy beste maat is, en 'n dogtertjie wat ten minste vyftig persent engeltjie is. *Dankie, Here ... elke dag saam met hulle is 'n wonderwerk.*

Die digitale syfers op Jake se wekker slaan oor en hy skeur sy oë weg van Jamie. Hy moet klaarmaak, anders gaan hy nie betyds by die werk wees nie. Sy skof begin negeuur, maar hy sal nie later as agtuur daar wees nie. Dit neem die ouens van nagskof gewoonlik 'n uur om hulle op hoogte van insidente te bring wat plaasgevind het terwyl Manhattan geslaap het.

Jake maak sy dagboek oop en begin skryf. Hy raak bewus van 'n rusteloosheid in sy binneste, iets waarop hy nie mooi sy vinger kan lê nie.



Hierdie keer verwys hy nie spesifiek na die Bybel of hoe dit op sy lewe van toepassing is nie. Hy skryf 'n brief.

*Liefste Jamie*

*Diep in my hart is daar 'n gevoel dat daar 'n verandering gaan kom vir my en jou. Dalk is dit jou vrae oor die kerk of dié dat jy deesdae langer met Sierra oor haar Bybelstories gesels. Hoe dit ook al sy, ek bid dat die Here jou hart sal aanraak, my lief. Hy beteken alles vir my, en ek weet dat Hy eendag ook alles vir jou sal beteken. Op daardie dag sal jy nie meer hoef bang te wees nie, want jy sal op God die Almagtige kan steun. Ek wil hê jy moet weet, my skat, dat wanneer jy daardie kosbare geloof aanneem, ek breër sal glimlag as wat jy my al ooit sien glimlag het. Selfs groter as my begeerte na jou liefde, smag ek na die wete dat ons tot in ewigheid bymekaar sal wees.*

*Ek kan my nie die ewigheid sonder jou indink nie. Ek is te lief vir jou om jou te verloor.*

Jake skryf amper twee bladsye vol voordat hy sy pen neersit. Toe maak hy sy dagboek en Bybel toe en bêre albei onder die bed. Hy leun oor en raak met sy gesig aan hare. “EK’s lief vir jou ...” Sy roer effens en maak haar oë oop.

“Mmmm.” Sy steek haar arms uit en hou Jake aan sy agterkop teë. “Kom hier.”

Jake grinnik. “Graag.” Hy leun half oor haar lyf en gee haar hierdie keer 'n behoorlike soen. Toe hy sy kop ophig, brand die begeerte in hulle albei se oë. “Jy’s volmaak, weet jy?”

“Nie so volmaak soos jy nie.” Sy soen hom weer en stoot die komberse van haar af. “Kom terug bed toe.”

“Moet my nie verlei nie.” Jake voel hoe sy liggaam op hare reageer, en hy oorweeg dit vir 'n oomblik. Dan soen hy haar nog 'n keer en sit regop. “Ek moet gaan stort. Die skofte ruil oor 'n uur.”

“Ag, kom nou, Jake.” Jamie sit regop en haar hande beweeg oor sy kaal bors. “Laat weet hulle jy’s siek. Dis so 'n mooi dag. Ons kan nog 'n rukkie in die bed bly en Sierra later dieretuin toe neem.”

Gewoonlik word Jamie skaars wakker om te groet; dus is haar versoek amper te veel om van die hand te wys. Hy laat sak haar terug op die bed, soen haar 'n paar maal en kom dan beslis orent. “Een van die ouens is siek.” Hy streel 'n paar los hare uit haar gesig. “Anders sou ek.” Hy kyk deur die venster. “Hulle voorspel in elk geval dat die lekker weer nog 'n paar dae gaan hou.”

“Volgende week dan?”

Hy grinnik en rek hom uit. “Oukei, volgende week. Tensy iemand anders siek word.” Hy draai na die badkamer, maar sy stem verklap steeds die passie wat hy vir haar voel. “Ek beter nou gaan stort.”

“Oukei.” Jamie laat haar asem teleurgesteld uit. “Jake, nog net een ding.”

Hy steek vas. “Wat?”

“Die stort ...” 'n Onnutsige glimlag pluk aan haar mond. “Maak dit maar 'n

koue een.”

’n Halfuur later is Jake in sy werksklere – ’n swart broek, wit T-hemp en kortmouhemp bo-oor, swart sokkies en gemaklike, netjiese skoene. Die uniform wat hy dra wanneer hulle uitgeroep word, bly by die stasie naby die wa. Gereed vir wanneer hulle ontbied word.

Hy soen Jamie ’n laaste keer. “Sien jou vanaand.”

“Is jy lus vir Chinese kos?”

“Sal lekker wees.” Hy begin glimlag, maar besluit daarteen. “Wag ... gaan jy kos maak?”

Sy giggel, plaas haar hand op sy bors en stoot hom speels weg van haar. “Toe, gaan werk, jou buffel. Daar is niks fout met my Chinese kookkuns nie.”

“As jy so sê.” Hy lig ’n wenkbrou toe hy na die deur toe staan. “Maar hou die Chinese plek se nommer gereed. Net vir ingeval.”

“Hei.” Sy klink skielik ernstig.

“Ja?” Hy swaai om en hulle oë ontmoet. Die spesiale kameraderie tussen hulle is dadelik daar.

“Wees versigtig.”

Hy knipoog vir haar. “Jy weet ek is, Jamie. Ek’s lief vir jou.”

“En ek vir jou.”

Op pad uit maak hy eers ’n draai in Sierra se kamer. Sy het reeds opgestaan en is voor haar klerekas doenig. Sover het sy ’n pienk spanbroek en blou-en-rooi gestreepte hempie aangetrek. Op vyf is dié aantrekkery die hoogtepunt van onafhanklikheid en ’n bewys dat sy Jamie se dogter is. Toe sy Jake sien, hardloop sy na hom toe en slaan haar armpies styf om sy bene. Die gevoel wat dit in Jake se hart wakker maak, laat ’n dag by die dieretuin wonderlik klink.

Hy raap haar op en nadat hy haar ’n stywe drukkies gegee het, sit hy haar weer neer. “Kyk hoe mooi lyk ek, Pappa.” Sy draai in die rondte. “Mamma sê ek moet kleure kies wat by mekaar pas. Pienk en rooi en blou pas by mekaar, nè?”

Hy byt sy lip vas. “Definitief, patat.” Hy hurk en vryf sy neus teen hare. “Pappa is laat, my skat. Ek sien jou weer na werk, oukei?”

“Eers ’n vlindersoentjie.” Nadat hulle hul wimpers teen mekaar gefladder het, staan sy weg en glimlag vir hom. “Daarso. Nou kan Pappa maar gaan.”

“Soet wees.” Hy gee haar nog ’n drukkies. “En moenie vergeet om te bid nie.”

“Oukei, Pappa. Lief vir Pappa.”

“Ek vir jou ook, liefste.” Hy staan op en waai vir haar ’n soentjie.

Sy maak asof sy dit uit die lug vang en druk dit teen haar hart. Toe blaas sy een in Jake se rigting. Hy gryp ’n hand vol lug. “Het hom!” Hy plaas sy vuus oor sy hart. “Vir ewig en altyd.”

“Vir ewig en altyd!” Sierra klap haar hande en spring op en af. “Tatta, Pappa.”

“Tatta, my skat. Ons kan perdziery as ek terugkom.”

Jake se uittog werk toe is ’n sielddodende oefening wat hy al toe-oë kan doen. Afhangende van die skof, gaan hy sommige dae met sy bakkie in stad toe en

parkeer hy by die stasie. Maar die laaste paar jaar werk hy hoofsaaklik dagskof en hierdie tyd van die oggend is dit so te sê onmoontlik om in Manhattan parkeerplek te kry. Hy gaan dus saam met die voetgangers aan boord van die veerboot.

Vanweë die mis en koue verkies hy dit gewoonlik om binne te sit, maar dis 'n lieflike oggend. Daar is nie 'n wolkie in sig nie en die stadsilhoeë strek soos 'n amper surrealistiese poskaart voor hom uit. Hy hou van die veerboot; dit maak die daaglikse pendeltog minder gejaag.

Jake gaan sit op een van die voorste sitplekke.

Op sulke dae is dit maklik om te verstaan waarom sy pa besluit het om hulle gesin in New York te kom vestig, waarom hy in hierdie dol, besige stad wou kom brandweerman wees. Manhattan pols van lewe en energie; die wolkekrabbers staan asof op aandag terwyl daar teen 'n dolle pas binnekant gewoeker word. Finansiële moondhede wêreldwyd staan terug en kyk na wat in New York gebeur.

Sy pa kon enige van die duisende plattelandse dorpies regoor Amerika gekies het. Plekke waar brandende huise groot nuus is en die meeste dae uit 'n rits paramediese oefenlopië en opleidingsessies bestaan het. Maar Jake is dankbaar dat sy pa op Manhattan besluit het – volgens hulle albei die grootste uitdaging vir enige brandweerman.

Nadat die veerboot vasgemeer het, neem Jake 'n paar ondergrondse treine tot by 'n stel trappe wat hom net 'n halwe blok van die stasie op straatvlak uitbring. Dis nou al sewentig jaar dat hierdie gebou Enjin 57 se basis is. Sy pa het nooit self daar gewerk nie, maar het afwisselend by twee nabygeleë stasies diens gedoen.

Jake gaan by die stasie se voordeur in en sy oog vang Larry by een van die tafeltjies teen die eetkamermuur. Hy glimlag vir Jake. “Jy’s laat, JB.”

Die ouens by die stasie noem hom nooit Jake Bryan nie. Hy is JB. Jake loer na 'n ou muurhorlosie bokant die kombuiswasbak. “Een minuut oor agt is nie laat nie, my ou maat. Dis etiket.”

“Gewoonlik is jy vroeg.”

“En?” Jake loop na die tafel toe.

“Jamie het jou opgehou.” Dis nie 'n vraag nie. Larry glimlag selfvoldaan en prop 'n halwe muffin in sy mond voordat hy 'n groot sluk koffie neem.

“Nie dat dit my pla nie, Larry.” Jake grinnik en gaan sit oorkant sy vriend. “'n Paar oggende se etiket sal jou en Sue dalk net goeddoen.”

“En 'n beker koffie sal jou goeddoen.” Hy staan op en gaan skink die laaste bietjie klonterige swart vloeistof uit die koffiemaker in 'n weggooibekertjie.

“Hierso.” Hy sit die koffie voor Jake neer. “Wees versigtig. Jy gaan dalk 'n lepel nodig hê.”

“Dankie.” Jake tel die bekertjie op en asem die stoom in.

Larry neem weer oorkant hom plaas. “Klink my die nagskof was stillerig.”

Die res van die span maak een vir een hulle verskyning en kry vir hulle koffie en muffins voordat hulle by die tafels kom sit. Maxwell is vandag in beheer.

Hy staan met sy rug teen die verweerde kombuistoonbank en open die vergadering. “Net ’n paar sake.” Hy kyk na die knyperbord in sy hand. “’n Blok suid van Forty-Second was daar ’n motorbrand wat opgevolg moet word. Die eienaar sê dit was brandstigting.”

Maxwell bespreek nog ’n paar items voordat hy ’n pot vars koffie begin maak. Hy kyk na die ouens wat nagskof gewerk het. “Nog iets?”

’n Paar van die manne maak voorstelle, en nog iemand herinner Maxwell aan ’n onafgehandelde insident van die naweek. Die volgende halfuur word daar gemoedelik gesels, soos altyd gedurende skofruiling. Daar is twee juniors, maar die res van die manne van Enjin 57 en Leer 96 werk al so lank saam by die stasie dat hulle so te sê familie is. Die stasie word deur ses-en-dertig ouens beman, genoeg vir drie skofte, en elkeen beskou die stasie as ’n tweede tuiste. Wanneer hulle nie brande blus nie, word daar kos gemaak, opgeruim en raad uitgedeel aan dié van hulle wat probleme het.

Wanneer hulle uitgeroep word, is hulle broers.

“Is jy met ons, JB?” Maxwell lig sy wenkbroue in Jake se rigting. “Ek wil weet wie die naweek se brand by die pakhuis opgevolg het.”

Jake sit regop en probeer fokus. Maxwell is nie ongeduldig nie, maar hy soek ’n antwoord. Voordat Jake sy gedagtes agtermekaar het, praat Larry. “JB se kop is elders.” Hy grinnik terwyl hy die ou langs hom in die ribbes pomp. “Te veel kwaliteittyd saam met daardie mooi vrou tjie van hom.”

“Of nie genoeg nie,” fluister Jake terug terwyl hy terselfdertyd sy volle aandag by Maxwell bepaal. Die man is ’n veteraan, ’n kaptein met twintig jaar se ervaring in die brandweer. Jake maak keel skoon. “Ek het die verslag hanteer, Kaptein. Niks buitengewoons nie. Ek wil vandag nog net ’n oproep of twee maak.”

Daar moet ’n verslag oor elke brand opgestel word. Sommige is eenvoudig en kan minute ná ’n insident gedoen word. Ander neem langer en behels onderhoude of ondersoekwerk voordat die oorsaak van ’n brand vasgestel kan word, en moontlike arrestasies gemaak word.

Maxwell is op die punt om iets te sê, toe die gedreun van ’n groot vliegtuig hom laat swyg. As veiligheidsmaatreël, veral ten opsigte van die World Trade Center, word vliegtuie ten strengste verbied om oor Manhattan te vlieg. Soos een man kyk die brandweermanne op.

“Hy is te laag ...” prewel Jake. Maar voordat iemand kan reageer, word die stil oggend deur ’n gedempte ontploffing geruk en vibreer die vloer onder hulle voete.

Maxwell is soos ’n pyl uit ’n boog by die deur, Jake en die ander agterna. Die toneel buitekant skok hulle tot stilstand. Daar is ’n massiewe brand hoog in een van die World Trade Center se torings en stukke beton stort honderde meters na benede. Jake staar in afgryse na die swart rookbolle en sy oë raak al hoe groter. *Liewe, Here ... nee ... dis onmoontlik.*

Rondom hom is dit asof die hele stad vir ’n oomblik asem ophou, asof hulle nie glo wat hulle sien nie. Motors trek teen bisarre hoeke van die pad af,

voetgangers het vasgesteek en kyk reguit op, hulle monde oop. Die volgende oomblik weerklink histeriese gille en uitroepe deur die lug. Aan die oorkant van die straat hou twee bejaarde vroue mekaar vas en begin huil.

'n Entjie weg kyk 'n man na die Twin Towers, en dan na die groepie brandweermanne. “Die vliegtuig ... het reguit in die gebou vasgevlieg!” Toe begin hy hardloop, en hy probeer nie eers die papiere keer wat uit sy aktetas fladder nie.

Jake se hart het wild aan die klop gegaan. 'n Vliegtuig het in die World Trade Center vasgevlieg? Dis onmoontlik, die verwoesting voor hom onwerklik. Vyftien meter hoë vuurballe en rook peul hoog uit die gebou. Jake het nog nooit so iets verskrikliks gesien nie.

Die New Yorkse brandweermanne praat graag oor die grote, die brand van alle brande waarheen al die stasies uitgeroep sal word. “Sien jou by die grote” het al 'n gesegde by die meeste brandweerstasies geword. Ook by Jake s'n. Hy skreef sy oë terwyl hy ongelowig na die geweldige omvang van die ontploffing kyk. Hoe op aarde kon die loads so 'n fout maak? Kon hy die gedoemde vliegtuig nie in die hawe of iewers in 'n onbewoonde area geland het nie?

En hoe gaan hulle so 'n groot brand so hoog bo die grond geblus kry?

'n Verskriklike gedagte flits deur Jake se kop. Wat as dit 'n passasiersvliegtuig was? Een met honderde mense aan boord? Hy ril toe nog iets by hom opkom. Hetsy dit 'n passasiersvliegtuig was of nie – daar gaan geweldige lewensverlies wees. So 'n intense brand beteken die dood van almal op die vliegtuig, en waarskynlik 'n paar honderd mense wat in die gebou werk.

Dalk meer.

Al hierdie gedagtes flits binne sekondes deur Jake se kop en die adrenalien bruis deur sy are. 'n Klomp mense verkeer in gevaar, duisende van hulle. Hy wil instinktief by die stasie instorm, in sy uniform spring en na die brand toe jaag.

Maar voordat hy kan beweeg, word die groep se geskokte stilte deur Maxwell se stem onderbreek – sterk en bedaad.

“Nou goed, manne. Gaan trek aan. Ons gaan dalk nie eerste uitgeroep word nie, maar ons sal op die lys wees.” Die mans haas hulle sonder 'n verdere woord na die stasie se garage. Hulle is halfpad ondertoe toe Maxwell vassteek en weer na hulle kyk. “Ek's nie juis 'n kerkmens nie, maar ek dink dis tyd dat ons almal bid.” Hy kyk weer na die brandende World Trade Center. “Ons gaan vandag baie lewens verloor.”

# Chapter NINE

SEPTEMBER 11, 2001 8:47 A.M.

Terrorists.

That was the first thought Eric Michaels had when he heard the explosion.

He'd been in Allen's office rehashing the conversation from the night before when the building was rocked by first one jolt, then another. The second one was both louder and longer, and Eric almost expected the floor to crumble beneath his feet.

He and Allen stared at each other for a moment and then dashed to the window behind Allen's desk. It faced due south, and from their vantage point, the city looked like it did on any other beautiful September morning. The sky was a brilliant blue; sailboats dotted the harbor. Not a plume of smoke, not a sign of trouble, not a thing out of place. But the rumble from the second explosion still filled the building, and Eric headed for the door. *Breathe*, he told himself. *Everything's going to be fine*. None of them knew what had happened, but Eric was sure of one thing. The destruction would be huge. "Let's check the rest of the office."

Allen nodded and followed Eric, and together they burst through the double oak doors and into the plush hallway. Outside Allen's office the entire unit seemed to be in a state of shock. Some people sat at their desks, hands frozen above their keyboards. Others had walked to the nearest windows and were staring down at the city below.

Three minutes after the explosion, sirens began to sound in the distance. More sirens than Eric had ever heard in his life. Whatever it was—it was big. And Eric guessed they were probably in danger. But from what? From where? Eric continued to move ahead of Allen toward the office entrance. "Let's check the other side of the building."

Dozens of people congregated in the firm's entryway, and now they

followed Allen and Eric down a series of hallways into a more open office that bordered the north side of the building. A crowd was gathered at the wall of windows, and several people had their hands over their mouths. Eric found a spot and wedged his way between two suits.

What he saw made his knees weak.

He wasn't sure if anything had happened to the south tower, where the Koppel and Grant offices were, but fire was pouring out of an entire bank of north tower windows, about thirty floors up from where Eric stood.

Behind him someone shouted. "I've got it on TV!"

Eric and Allen and a couple dozen other people crowded around the man's desk. A nineteen-inch color television screen was full of an image of the flaming World Trade Center, and a reporter in the studio was talking loud and fast, his voice-over somewhat broken up as the horrifying pictures from the scene continued to come in.

"I repeat, a passenger jet has slammed into the north tower of the World Trade Center. It is assumed at this time that the disaster was some kind of an accident, though ground control received no reports of trouble before the collision occurred."

Eric took a step back from the desk and turned toward the window once more. A passenger jet? How in the world had something like that happened? And what if it wasn't a mistake? Stunned, Eric walked the remaining ten feet back to the window edge and stared at the flames still pouring from the neighboring building. Hundreds of people had to be dead. And what about the people above the fire? How would they ever get past the inferno?

For a moment, Eric hung his head and closed his eyes. *God ... it has to be a nightmare in there. Help those people ... please.* As Eric blinked and took in the awful sight again, he had a distant realization. He had talked to God as though it were the most natural thing in the world. The notion produced a dozen questions at once. Why had it taken this long for Eric to break his silence with God? Why had he stopped praying in the first

place? Babies died, didn't they? Had it made his loss any easier by cutting off God? And would God really hear him now, after all these years?

They were questions he'd have to answer later. Right now the entire city was in crisis, and he had to figure out what to do, where to go. Allen was talking to a man a few feet away, and Eric turned back toward the interior of the building. Nearly half the people from the sixty-fourth floor were headed for the bank of elevators. Nervous conversations took place all around him, and Eric caught bits and pieces of the closest of them.

"... down now before something happens to *this* building."

"... no point in staying. They'll have the whole street cordoned off if we don't get out of here soon."

"I couldn't work ... not with the tower next to us on fire."

Distant sirens at the ground level continued to fill the air outside the building. The sixty-fourth floor had a feel of chaos, but not panic. Not yet. Certainly the other floors were experiencing the same thing.

Eric glanced around the expansive office. Most of the employees on that floor worked at the insurance company. There were easily a couple hundred workstations within view of where Eric was standing, and clearly, not all the people at them were leaving.

Allen joined him again, and they watched the pictures on TV for a few minutes. Around them, those who didn't grab their things and leave formed groups of threes and fours, and with a slow, hushed presence, they walked back to their desks.

"We're better off up here out of the way," an older man said to a group of wide-eyed women. "There's nothing to worry about."

"What if the fire spreads?"

The man shook his head. "These buildings are too safe for that. Believe me, you're better off back at your desks. You can watch the news from there. The streets will be a nightmare with all those fire trucks."

Televisions throughout the floor were on now, all tuned to the disaster. Eric glanced at his watch and figured it was just before six o'clock



on the West Coast. Laura would still be sleeping, but the news would make her frantic. The only way to ease the shock was to call her himself.

He turned to Allen. "I need to call Laura."

"Good idea." Allen's face was pale, but his voice stayed calm. "I'll come with you. Someone at the LA office needs to know we're okay."

They moved quickly through the insurance company's work space back down the hallway to the office of Koppel and Grant. The secretary had left the front desk, and the place was deserted. Allen strode down the hallway toward his office, and Eric flopped into the secretary's chair, picked up the phone, and dialed his home number.

He listened to the first ring, and suddenly he had an image of the unbelievable nightmare taking place in the building next door. People would be burning alive, suffering torturous deaths. A second ring sounded, and Eric closed his eyes, trying to shut out the horrible pictures in his head. Then for the second time in a handful of minutes, Eric did something he hadn't done in years.

He prayed.

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Laura had been awake since five-thirty that morning, unable to sleep after the vivid details in her dreams. When the phone rang she glanced at the clock, and in the early morning fog, she wondered if maybe she'd overslept. She reached for the receiver, saw it wasn't on the hook, and remembered that she'd left it in the upstairs office the night before.

It was cool for a Los Angeles morning. She hopped out of bed, slipped into her robe, and darted down the hallway. Josh was sleeping two doors away, so she kept her steps light. She found the phone on the office desk and clicked it just as it rang a third time.

"Hello?" She was out of breath as she fell back on a leather love seat against the office window.

"Hi ... it's me."

For a moment she thought it was Clay. The two brothers' voices were

almost identical, but then Clay would never have called her at this hour.

But neither would Eric.

“Eric?” He was breathless, his voice filled with an urgent tone she couldn't remember hearing before.

“Something's happened, Laura ... I want you to listen to me. A plane flew into the World Trade Center building, the one next to the one I'm in. A passenger plane. The entire upper section of the tower is on fire.” He paused. “My tower is fine.” He took a shaky breath. “I wanted you to know I was safe.”

“Where ... where are you? Are you on the ground?”

“No. I'm still on the sixty-fourth floor. No one's telling us to leave.” He hesitated. “I thought it was a bomb. In this building, not the other one. It was that loud.”

“You can't stay up there.” Laura's heart skipped a beat and then raced at twice its normal speed. She grabbed a nearby remote control, flicked on the television, and immediately saw it. The building was billowing black smoke and enormous flames. Her free hand flew over her mouth. “Oh, Eric ... it's awful. I've ... I've never seen anything like it. A passenger plane did that?”

“Yes.” Eric was breathing fast. He must've been more worried than he let on. “The reporter said it looks like an accident, like the pilot lost control of the plane.”

Laura's eyes were locked on the image of the burning tower. “An accident? Surely a pilot could figure out a way to miss the World Trade Center. Even if the plane was out of control. You aren't staying, are you?”

“For now. Most people seem to think we're better off up here, out of the way of the firefighters.”

Suddenly, Laura saw something fall from high up near the burning floors of the building. Not three seconds later, two more things plummeted from one of the flaming windows.

“No! This is too awful.” The reporter's voice sounded suddenly

frantic. "I believe those were people you just saw falling from the building." He paused. "Falling or jumping." Another hesitation. "Yes, I've just been told those were people jumping from the tower." His voice grew quieter. "We can only imagine the horror taking place in that building right now."

Laura closed her eyes for a moment. What had she just witnessed? Frantic people hurling themselves to certain death? It was the worst thing she could imagine. "God Almighty help them." She muttered the words and struggled to exhale.

"What's happening, Laura? I don't have a TV in the office here."

"People are jumping." Her tone was soft, filled with shock. She looked away from the television. "I can't watch."

"Don't then. Leave it on, but look away." For the first time in years his tone held a hint of concern for her. "Maybe I'll leave after all. Go back to the hotel and stay there until my flight leaves. That way I'll ..."

She was no longer listening to him. From the corner of the screen, an enormous passenger jet came into view, angled slightly, and headed straight for Eric's building. Laura jumped up, her heart in her throat.

"Eric!" She shouted his name and gripped the phone. "Look out!"

The plane slammed straight into the tower, and flames sliced across the building and ripped through at least four floors. "Eric! Can you hear me?" Laura screamed into the receiver, her words shrill and desperate. Her entire body shook, and she felt her head begin to spin. Why wouldn't he answer her? "Talk to me!"

She smashed the phone to her ear, frantic for any kind of sound from him. But there was only silence. Two seconds passed, and she heard a click on the other line, followed by a dial tone. She held the phone in front of her and pressed the Caller I.D. button. Her fingers were shaking so much she could barely press the talk button, but as she did, the phone automatically dialed the number Eric had called from.

Laura waited, unable to breathe. But instead of ringing, there was

only a fast busy signal. “No, God ... no!” She whispered the prayer as she dropped the TV remote, grabbed a quick breath, and dialed the number again. “Not Eric. Get him out of there ... please.” Again the busy signal sounded on the other end. She moved closer to the television and dropped to the floor, her eyes glued to the second flaming tower.

“No, God ...!” Her words were muted, breathy and weak. She wanted to scream, but she couldn't find the strength. Black spots danced before her eyes, and she slipped her head between her knees for a moment. She couldn't faint, not now. She needed to find out what floors were involved in this second collision. It was possible Eric was okay. Yes, it had to be possible.

She sucked in three quick breaths and ordered herself to remain alert.

A few feet away, the reporter was shouting out the news. “A second plane, I repeat, a second plane has hit the World Trade Center south tower. We're getting word now that the United States is possibly under some type of terrorist attack.”

Laura lifted her head and pursed her lips. Short breaths. She needed to take short breaths and push the air out so she didn't hyperventilate. “What floor?” She raised her voice at the television and slid closer. “Tell me what floor!”

“... terrorists may have hijacked the planes and flown them into the World Trade Center as some kind of attack. We have confirmation now that one of the planes was American Airlines Flight 11 out of Boston and the other ...”

The images made Laura dizzy. Sections of both towers were fully engulfed in flames, but where was Eric? She lifted the telephone receiver close to her face and thought of something. His cell phone! Why hadn't he called from his cell in the first place? Eric always had his cell phone. She dialed the number from memory.

“Answer ... come on, Eric, answer the phone!” She hissed the words, certain that this time she'd hear ringing on the other end. But instead, a

mechanical voice sounded across the line. “The caller you're trying to reach is not available or out of the service area. Please try your call at a later—”

She dropped the receiver and slapped the television. “Tell me what floor!” Her tone was loud again, almost shouting. “Where's the fire? Come on, tell me!” The sound was too low, that was it. The television needed to be louder in case they might mention which floors were on fire. She searched the carpet beside her for the TV remote and grabbed it. Her hands shook worse than before, but she managed to turn up the volume.

“... made hotter by an unknown amount of jet fuel aboard the planes.” The reporter hesitated. “Reports say that the plane that crashed into the south tower was United Flight 175 from Boston. There may have been a hundred or more people on each of those passenger jets.”

The news camera angle widened some, and Laura could see most of both of the towers. An idea gripped her. She could count down from the top of the south tower; figure out where the fire was burning that way. The black dots were back, but she ignored them. Walking on her knees, she came up to the television set, placed her finger on the top floor of the flaming south tower and began silently counting.

*One, two, three, four, five, six ...*

The image changed, and now Laura was looking at dozens of fire trucks arriving at the scene. “No! Don't do this to me.” Her scream echoed against the walls. “Let me see the building!” Nausea swept over her, and she shook her head, desperate to keep herself from fainting. Three quick breaths and she brought her lips together once more. *Blow out ... God, help me blow out. I need to focus.*

The picture shifted again, and this time Laura could see a partial view of the south tower. Bringing her nose almost to the screen, she began to cry. “Eric! Where are you?... Call me and tell me you're okay!”

Something moved outside the office. She looked up, and through her tears she saw Josh, standing in the hallway staring at her, his mouth open. He was still in his pajamas, and his eyes looked squinty.

“Mom? What's wrong?” He entered the office and studied her.

She'd woken him up. Laura wiped at her eyes and sat back on her heels. Something about the boy's presence instantly restored within her a semblance of normalcy. “Josh, honey, come here.” She held out her arms and waited while he crossed the room.

He hugged her, his arms tight around her neck for several seconds. Then he pulled away and looked at the TV screen. “Wow.” Once more the image was of the Twin Towers, balls of fire and black smoke still pouring from the buildings. Josh studied the picture for a moment while Laura held her breath. Josh had seen pictures of Manhattan often enough to recognize it. He shifted his gaze to Laura. “Mom, is that New York City?”

Laura gulped and locked eyes with her son; then she dropped to the floor again. She had to tell him; there was no way around it. Besides, the news station had begun to replay the image of the passenger jet slamming into the south tower. “Yes.” She reached out and took his small hand in hers. “Airplanes crashed into the buildings, Josh.”

He looked at the television again. “Is Dad in there?”

“Well ...” She couldn't seem to get enough air to talk, but she forced herself to say the words, anyway. “Yes, honey. He's in there somewhere.”

“In the ...” The color drained from Josh's face, and he blinked twice. Again he glanced at Laura. “In the fire? Is that where Dad is?”

“No.” Laura shook her head as quickly as she could, short jerky movements as though the more certain she appeared about Eric's fate, the better off he'd somehow be. “No, Daddy's not in the fire. His office is lower than that.” Her words sounded unnatural, like someone else was saying them. It was impossible to know if she was telling her son the truth or not. *Where is he, God ... how come they won't say what floor the fire's on?*

Josh sat down cross-legged on the floor beside Laura. “That's the biggest fire I've ever seen.”

“Me too.” Laura wanted to scream. She wanted to run around the room and hit the walls, or call someone in New York and ask if Eric was

okay. But she had Josh to think about. She pursed her lips once more and blew out two quick times. Another idea hit her. She could call Murphy from the Woodland Hills office and ask if he'd heard from Eric. Her husband was meticulously organized. Murphy's number was bound to be in the desk drawer in Eric's phonebook.

She was on her feet, grabbing the phone from the floor and tearing through the drawer. It had to be here. Her hands trembled less than before as she flipped through the letters to the *M* section. Where is it? Come on ... Murphy ... Murphy ... Murphy.

There it was. Three numbers—one for work, one for the man's cell, and one for home.

“What're you doing?” Josh was watching her, his face nervous.

“Calling Daddy's friend.” She managed to keep her voice calm. “He might know where Daddy is.”

As quickly as her fingers could move, she tapped out the number and held the phone to her ear. Murphy answered on the second ring. “Hello?”

“Hi ... this is Laura Michaels.”

There was the briefest pause. “Are you watching the news?”

“Yes.” Laura fought back the dizziness. “I was talking to Eric when it ... when the plane hit.”

“I'm sorry, Laura.” Murphy's voice was stilted, unnatural. The entire conversation, the scenes from the television, all of it felt like it was happening to someone else.

“Have you heard from him? Since it happened, I mean?” As the words left her mouth, she realized how crazy they sounded. Of course Murphy hadn't heard from Eric. The phones had gone out the minute the plane hit the building. Still, she waited for Murphy's response, hoping that somehow he knew something she didn't.

“He hasn't called.” Murphy waited a moment. “But he's okay, Laura. I have to believe that.”

A flicker of hope ignited in Laura's soul. “How ... how come?”

“The news said the plane entered at about the seventy-eighth floor. Koppel and Grant's on the sixty-fourth. I'd guess the fire's spread below the crash site, but our guys were down far enough. They should be able to get out.”

Laura imagined Eric and Allen and the others from the company rushing for the elevator. Or maybe the elevator wasn't working. If not, then they'd be pushing frantically for the stairwell trying to walk to ground level. The notion was absurd. Sixty-four floors! Eric might be able to handle the climb down, but what about the older men and women who worked that high up. “Eric knows I'm worried. How long would it take him to get out of there?”

“One of the reporters said the evacuation was averaging about one floor every minute. So, I don't know. An hour at least.”

“How long's it been?” Laura steadied herself against the desk to keep from falling. The floor beneath her feet felt like it had turned to jelly, the same way it felt the last time a minor earthquake rolled through their area. Laura closed her eyes again to stave off the nausea.

“The plane hit a little after nine.” Murphy paused. “It's a quarter past right now.”

Laura opened her eyes and took Josh's hand in hers as she did the math. “So sometime around ten o'clock he should be calling me. Is that right?”

Murphy was quiet. “Things are pretty crazy down there, Laura. I'd give him longer than that. Who knows, the entire phone system is probably jammed.”

“But he has his cell phone, wouldn't you say? Eric always has his cell.”

“Have you tried it?” Murphy sounded tired.

“Yes.” Laura felt the room sway. Josh's eyes were wide now, but she couldn't do anything about it. She made a fist with her free hand and pressed it into her stomach, anything to ward off the nausea. This couldn't



be happening. All of it seemed like something from a terrible dream. As though any minute she'd wake up and everything would be fine. She remembered Murphy on the other end. "What'd you ask?"

"About Eric's cell phone."

"Oh, right. I tried. The call wouldn't go through."

"So maybe closer to ten you can try it again."

"Good. Good idea. Thanks, Murphy." Laura looked at Josh, but he was watching the TV, his gaze fixed on the terrible pictures. "I gotta go."

"He's all right, Laura."

"Pray, Murphy. Do that for him, will you?" Laura had no idea if Murphy was a praying man, but it didn't matter. Right now she guessed just about everyone in America believed in prayer.

"I'll pray. Call me if you hear anything."

Laura hung up and returned to her spot next to Josh. It didn't matter how she felt or whether she fainted. She needed to get Josh away from the television. Images like the ones that had been flashing across the screen could scar a little boy forever. Especially if Eric ...

She refused the thought. "Why don't you go get dressed, buddy?"

He nodded absently, never taking his eyes from the TV. "When are they going to put out the fire?"

"They're probably putting it out right now."

He looked at her. "From the inside, you mean?"

"Mmmhmm." Her stomach convulsed. They couldn't possibly have firefighters up that far into the building yet. The fire was clearly raging out of control in both towers. And if they didn't get water on it soon, it would spread to—

"They'll get it out, though, right, Mom? Firemen always get the fires out, don't they?"

It was the first time Laura had considered the idea. Firefighters would have water sources on the ground, but seventy floors up? Eighty or ninety? What could they possibly do to douse a fire that size so far up in the air?

Josh was waiting for an answer. Laura still had hold of his hand, and she squeezed it gently. “Yes, son. They’ll get it out.” She leaned forward, and against everything in her, she turned off the television. “Daddy’ll call in an hour or so and tell us all about it.”

Laura walked Josh to his room and helped him find a pair of shorts and a T-shirt. The whole time he asked questions about firefighters and mile-long hoses and ladders that could reach up to the sky. She did her best to answer him, but she was haunted by the most awful idea.

What if the fire had spread through the stairwell? What if Eric and the others were trapped, unable to get out? And what if the flames had spread to the floors beneath the crash site. Even the sixty-fourth floor? What if an hour passed and she didn’t hear from Eric?

*God ... stop my terrible thoughts. Please ... Help me believe that Eric's okay. Be with him, guide him down the stairs and back home, Lord. I beg You ...*

Then quiet words came from someplace deep in her soul: *Lean not on your own understanding, daughter ...*

But the words were lost in a fog of panicky questions. What if they couldn’t get water up that high? What if ...

The list would work its way through her mind and then start over again. What if the fire had spread through the stairwell? What if Eric and the others were trapped, unable to get out? And finally the worst question of all. The one that—as she made oatmeal for Josh—made her gasp for breath every minute or so.

What if she never saw Eric again?

## Nege

11 September 2001 08:47

Terroriste.

Dit is Eric Michaels se eerste gedagte toe hy die ontploffing hoor.

Hy en Allen was besig om die vorige aand se gesprek in sy kantoor te

bespreek toe die gebou eers deur een skudding, en toe 'n volgende geruk is. Die tweede een was harder en langer, en Eric het vir 'n oomblik gedink die vloer gaan onder hom meegee.

Nadat hy en Allen mekaar 'n oomblik aangestaar het, hardloop hulle na die venster agter Allen se lessenaar. Die kantoor kyk suid en deur die venster lyk die stad soos op enige ander lieflike Septemberoggend. Die lug is wolkloos en blou en 'n klompie seilbote lê in die hawe. Hy gewaar nie 'n rookwolk of enige teken van moeilikheid of iets ongewoons nie. Maar die gerammel van die tweede ontploffing tril nog deur die gebou en Eric haas hom na die deur. *Haal net asem*, praat hy met homself. *Alles gaan oukei wees*. Nie een van hulle weet wat gebeur het nie, maar van een ding is Eric seker. Die verwoesting gaan groot wees. "Ek wil kyk wat hier buite aangaan."

Allen knik en volg Eric toe hy die groot houtdeur oopruk en na die ruim kantoorearea storm. Die hele afdeling is in 'n skoktoestand. Sommige van die personeellede sit by hulle lessenaars, hulle hande versteen op hulle toetsborde. Ander het opgespring en kyk deur die vensters na die stad onder hulle.

Drie minute ná die ontploffing begin sirenes in die verte loei. Meer sirenes as wat Eric al ooit in sy lewe gehoor het. Wat dit ook al is – dis groot. En Eric vermoed hulle is waarskynlik in gevaar. Maar waarvan en van waar? Eric loop voor Allen uit na die kantooringang. "Kom ons gaan kyk of 'n mens iets aan die ander kant van die gebou kan sien."

Daar is dosyne mense in die firma se ingangsportaal en hulle volg Allen en Eric deur 'n reeks gange na 'n oper kantoor aan die noordekant van die gebou. Daar is 'n samedromming van mense voor die vensters en verskeie staan hand oor die mond geslaan. Eric kry 'n plek en wurm hom tussen twee mans in.

Die toneel voor hom wil sy knieë laat swik.

Hy is nie seker of daar iets in die suidelike toring naby Koppel & Grant se kantore gebeur het nie, maar reuse vlamme borrel uit 'n hele reeks vensters uit die noordelike toring, sowat dertig verdiepings bokant Eric.

Agter hom roep iemand. "Dis op televisie."

Eric en Allen en 'n paar ander mense skaar hulle om die man se lessenaar. Op die skerm is daar beelde van die brandende World Trade Center en 'n verslaggewer praat hard en vinnig. Die klank is swak en sy stem breek op terwyl verskriklike beelde van die toneel bly instroom.

"Ek herhaal, 'n passasiersvliegtuig het in die noordelike toring van die World Trade Center vasgevlieg. Daar word tans aanvaar dat die ramp 'n ongeluk was, alhoewel grondbeheer voor die botsing nie van enige probleme in kennis gestel is nie."

Eric staan terug en draai weer na die venster. 'n Passasiersvliegtuig? Hoe op aarde het so iets gebeur? En sê nou dit was nie 'n fout nie? Eric loop geskok terug na die venster en staar na die vlamme wat steeds uit die gebou langsaan borrel. Hoeveel honderde mense is dood? En wat van die mense bokant die ontploffing? Hoe gaan hulle ooit verby die vlammehel kom?

Vir 'n oomblik laat Eric sy kop hang en maak sy oë toe. *Here ... dit moet 'n*

*nagmerrie vir daardie mense wees. Help hulle ... asseblief.* Toe hy sy oë oopmaak en opnuut in die verskriklike toneel vaskyk, dring 'n stadige besef tot hom deur. Hy het met God gepraat asof dit die natuurlikste ding op aarde is. 'n Hele klomp vrae word tegelykertyd deur hierdie besef ontlont. Hoekom het dit Eric so lank geneem om sy stilte teenoor God te verbreek? Waarom het hy in die eerste plek ophou bid? Ja, hulle babatjie is dood, maar het die skeiding tussen hom en God sy verlies enigszins makliker gemaak? En sal die Here nou, ná al hierdie jare, hoor as hy bid?

Hy sal hierdie vrae later moet beantwoord. Op die oomblik verkeer die hele stad in 'n krisis, en hy moet probeer besluit wat om te doen, waarheen om te gaan. Allen is besig om met 'n paar mans te praat en Eric loop dieper die gebou in. Amper die helfte van die mense op die vier-en-sestigste vloer stroom na die hysbakke toe. Rondom hom word daar senuweeagtig gepraat en Eric vang brokkies en stukkies van die naaste gesprekke.

“... uitkom voordat daar iets met hierdie gebou gebeur.”

“... nie help om te bly nie. Hulle sal die hele straat afsluit as ons nie gou hier uitkom nie.”

“Ek kan nie werk nie ... nie met die brand hier langsaan nie.”

Die sirenes loei asof van ver af op straat buite die gebou. Op die vier-en-sestigste vloer heers daar 'n ligte chaos, maar nie paniek nie. Nog nie. Op die ander vloere gaan dit waarskynlik dieselfde.

Eric se oë dwaal deur die ruim kantoor. Die meeste werknemers op daardie vloer werk vir die versekeringsmaatskappy. Van waar hy staan, kan Eric maklik honderd werkstasies sien, en dis duidelik dat nie al die mense op pad uit is nie.

Allen kom weer by hom staan en hulle bly nog 'n paar minute vasgenael na die televisie kyk. Diegene wat nie besig is om hulle goed inderhaas bymekaar te maak en te loop nie, vorm groepies van drie en vier en beweeg in 'n gedempte stilte terug na hulle lessenaars toe.

“Dis beter vir ons hier bo,” sê 'n ouer man vir 'n paar vroue met groot, bang oë. “Ons hoef nie bang te wees nie.”

“Sê nou die brand versprei?”

Die man skud sy kop. “Hierdie geboue is goed ontwerp. Glo my, dis vir ons almal beter by ons lessenaars. Julle kan die nuus van hier af dophou. Die strate gaan 'n nagmerrie wees met al die brandweerwaens.”

Oral in die kantoor het mense hulle televisies aangeskakel om te kyk hoe die drama ontvou. Eric loer na sy horlosie. Dis net voor ses in Los Angeles. Laura sal nog slaap, maar sy sal histories wees as die nuus haar bereik. Die enigste manier om die skok ligter te maak, is om haar self te bel.

Hy draai na Allen. “Ek moet Laura gaan bel.”

“Goeie idee.” Allen is bleek, maar sy stem is kalm. “Ek kom saam met jou. Ons moet die LA-kantoor laat weet ons is veilig.”

Hulle beweeg vinnig deur die versekeringsmaatskappy se kantore terug na Koppel & Grant se kantoor. Die sekretaresse sit nie meer in ontvangs nie en

die plek is verlate. Allen gaan deur na sy kantoor toe en Eric sak op die sekretaresse se stoel neer, tel die telefoon op en skakel sy huisnommer.

Hy luister na die eerste lui en skielik kan hy die ongelooflike nagmerrie sien wat in die gebou langsaan afspeel. Mense wat lewend verbrand en uiteindelik 'n verskriklike dood sterf. Die foon lui weer en Eric maak sy oë toe in 'n poging om van die verskriklike beelde ontslae te raak. Dan, vir die tweede keer in 'n paar minute, doen Eric iets wat hy in jare nie gedoen het nie.

Hy bid.

Laura lê al van halfses af wakker. Na haar helder droom kon sy nie weer aan die slaap raak nie. Toe die telefoon lui, kyk sy na die wekker en in die vroeë oggendskemer wonder sy of sy dalk verslaap het. Sy steek haar hand uit, sien dat die koordlose foon nie daar is nie, en onthou dat sy dit die vorige aand bo in die studeerkamer gelos het.

Dit is 'n koel oggend vir Los Angeles. Sy spring uit die bed en trek haar kamerjas somer in die draf aan. Josh slaap twee deure van haar af; dus beweeg sy ligvoets. Sy kry die foon op die lessenaar en antwoord toe dit 'n derde keer lui.

“Hallo?” Sy is uitasem toe sy op 'n opsitbank teen die venster neerval.

“Haai ... dis ek.”

Vir 'n oomblik dink sy dis Clay. Die twee broers klink amper identies, maar Clay sou nooit hierdie tyd van die oggend bel nie.

Eric eintlik ook nie.

“Eric?” Hy is uitasem en daar is 'n dringende ondertoon in sy stem wat sy nog nie voorheen gehoor het nie.

“Daar het iets gebeur, Laura ... ek wil hê jy moet na my luister. 'n Vliegtuig het in die World Trade Center vasgevlieg, in die gebou langs myne. 'n Passasiersvliegtuig. Die hele boonste deel van die toring is aan die brand.” Hy swyg. “Die suidelike toring makeer niks nie.” Hy haal bewerig asem. “Ek wou net hê jy moet weet ek's veilig.”

“Waar ... waar is jy? Op die grond?”

“Nee. Ek's nog op die vier-en-sestigste vloer. Ons het nie opdrag om te ontruim nie. Ek het gedink dis 'n bom. In hierdie gebou, nie die ander een nie. Dis hoe groot die slag was.”

“Jy kan nie daar bly nie.” Laura se hart mis 'n slag en begin dan holderstebolder klop. Sy gryp die afstandbeheerder, skakel die televisie aan en sien dit onmiddellik. Die gebou is in swart rookwolke en enorme vlamme gehul. Haar vry hand vlieg na haar mond. “O, Eric ... dis verskriklik. Ek't ... ek't nog nooit so iets gesien nie. Jy sê dit was 'n passasiersvliegtuig?”

“Ja.” Eric se asemhaling is gejaagd. Hy is duidelik meer ontsteld as wat hy wil laat blyk. “Die verslaggewer sê dit lyk soos 'n ongeluk, asof die loods beheer verloor het.”

Laura se oë is vasgenael op die beeld van die brandende toring. “'n Ongeluk? Ek's seker 'n loods kan 'n manier kry om die World Trade Center te mis. Selfs al was die vliegtuig buite beheer. Jy gaan nie daar bly nie, of hoe?”

“Vir eers. Die meeste mense dink dis beter hier bo, uit die brandweermanne se pad.”

Skielik sien Laura iets hoog uit die noordelike gebou val. Drie sekondes later tuimel nog twee voorwerpe uit die brandende vensters.

“Nee! Dis verskriklik.” Die verslaggewer klink skielik buite homself. “Dit lyk asof daar mense is wat uit die vensters val.” Hy bly stil. “Val of spring.” Nog ’n aarseling. “Ja. Ek het sopas gehoor dat daar mense is wat uit die toring spring.” Hy vervolg in ’n sagter stem. “Ons kan ons net die verskrikking voorstel wat op die oomblik in daardie gebou afspeel.”

Laura maak haar oë toe. Wat het sy sopas aanskou? Paniekerige mense wat na hulle dood spring? Sy kan haar so iets verskrikliks nie voorstel nie. “God, help hulle.” Sy prewel die woorde en moet haarself forseer om haar asem uit te blaas.

“Wat gebeur, Laura? Ek het nie ’n televisie hier in die kantoor nie.”

“Daar is mense wat uit die gebou spring.” Haar stem is amper weg, so groot is haar skok. Sy kyk weg van die televisie. “Ek kan nie kyk nie.”

“Moet dan nie. Hou dit aan, maar kyk weg.” Vir die eerste keer in jare is daar besorgdheid in sy stem. “Dalk moet ek tog teruggaan hotel toe totdat my vlug vertrek. Dan kan ek ... ”

Sy luister nie meer na hom nie. Asof uit die niet het ’n enorme passasiersvliegtuig op die skerm verskyn. Die volgende oomblik draai dit skuins en pyl dan direk op Eric se gebou af. Laura spring op, haar hart in haar keel.

“Eric!” Sy skree sy naam en klem die telefoon vas. “Oppas!”

Die volgende oomblik sien sy hoe die vliegtuig die gebou tref, hoe vlamme deur die gebou sny en deur minstens vier vloere skeur. “Eric! Kan jy my hoor?” Laura gil in die gehoorstuk, haar stem skril en desperaat. Haar hele liggaam ruk en haar kop begin draai. Hoekom antwoord hy haar nie. “Praat met my!”

Sy klem die foon teen haar oor vas in die desperate hoop om iets van hom te hoor. Maar daar is niks. Twee sekondes later hoor sy ’n klikgeluid, gevolg deur ’n luitoon. Sy hou die telefoon voor haar en haar vingers bewe so dat sy skaars die regte knoppies gedruk kry, maar uiteindelik skakel die telefoon die nommer waarvandaan Eric haar gebel het.

Laura wag asemloos. Maar in plaas daarvan om te lui, is daar net ’n besettoon. “Nee, Here ... nee!” Sy fluister die gebed toe sy die televisie se afstandbeheerder laat val, haar asem intrek en die nommer weer skakel. “Nie Eric nie. Kry hom asseblief daar uit ... ” Dis weer net die besettoon wat in haar oor piep. Sy loop tot voor die televisie en sak op die vloer neer, haar oë op die tweede brandende toring vasgenael.

“Nee, God ... nee!” Haar woorde is gedemp, haar stem asemrig en swak. Sy wil skree, maar sy het nie die krag nie. Daar is swart spikkels voor haar oë en sy laat sak haar kop ’n oomblik tussen haar knieë. Sy mag nie flou word nie, nie nou nie. Sy moet uitvind watter verdiepings saam met die vliegtuig

ontplof het. Dis moontlik dat Eric ongeskonde is. Ja, dit moet moontlik wees.

Sy haal drie keer vinnig asem en maan haarself om nugter te bly.

Oor die televisie hoor sy die verslaggewer gil. “’n Tweede vliegtuig, ek herhaal, ’n tweede vliegtuig het die suidelike toring van die World Trade Center getref. Daar word nou berig dat dit die een of ander soort aanval op die Verenigde State is.”

Laura kyk op en pers haar lippe opmekaar. Sy moet asemhaal, moet die lug uit haar longe dwing sodat sy nie hiperventileer nie. “Watter verdieping?” Sy praat hardop met die televisie en skuif nader. “Sê net watter vloer!”

“... moontlik dat terroriste die vliegtuie gekaap het en die World Trade Center geteiken het. Ons het nou bevestiging ontvang dat een van die vliegtuie American Airlines vlug 11 uit Boston was. Die ander ...”

Die beelde laat Laura lighoofdig voel. Gedeeltes van albei torings is nou heeltemal in vlamme gehul, maar waar is Eric? Sy hou die telefoon naby haar gesig en dink aan iets. Sy selfoon! Hoekom het sy hom nie in die eerste plek op sy sel gebel nie? Sy skakel die nommer.

“Antwoord ... kom, Eric, antwoord die foon!” Sy sis die woorde, oortuig dat sy die foon hierdie keer aan die ander kant sal hoor lui. Maar oomblikke later word sy deur ’n meganiese stem ingelig dat die persoon wat sy wil bereik, tans nie beskikbaar is nie en dat sy later weer moet probeer.

Sy laat val die telefoon en klap die televisie. “Sê my watter verdieping!” Haar stem grens aan ’n gil. “Waar’s die brand? Sê my!” Die volume is te laag, besluit sy. Die televisie moet harder wees vir ingeval hulle noem watter verdiepings aan die brand is. Sy tas op die mat langs haar rond en gryp die afstandbeheerder. Haar hande bewe erger as voorheen, maar sy slaag daarin om die volume hoër te stel.

“... vererger deur ’n onbekende hoeveelheid brandstof aan boord van die vliegtuie.” Die verslaggewer aarsel. “Daar word berig dat die vliegtuig wat die suidelike toring getref het, United Flight 175 uit Boston was. Daar was moontlik ’n honderd of meer passasiers op elkeen van daardie vliegtuie.”

Die kamera zoem uit en nou kan Laura die grootste deel van albei torings sien. ’n Idee kom by haar op. Sy kan van bo af begin om die vloere van die suidelike toring te tel en só vasstel waar die brand is. Die swart spikkels dans weer voor haar oë, maar sy ignoreer dit. Sy loop op haar knieë tot by die televisie, plaas haar vinger op die boonste vloer van die brandende suidelike toring en begin saggies tel.

*Een, twee, drie, vier, vyf, ses ...*

Die beeld verander en nou kyk Laura na dosyne brandweerwaens wat op die toneel verskyn. “Nee! Moet dit nie aan my doen nie.” Haar gil eggo teen die mure. “Wys my die gebou!” Sy voel skielik naar en sy skud haar kop teen die lighoofdigheid. Sy trek haar asem weer in en pers haar lippe opmekaar. *Asem uit ... Here, help my om uit te asem. Ek moet fokus.*

Die beeld verander weer en hierdie keer kan Laura ’n gedeelte van die suidelike toring sien. Met haar gesig amper teen die skerm begin sy huil.

“Eric! Waar is jy? Bel my en sê dat jy oukei is!”

Buite die studeerkamer trek iets haar aandag. Sy kyk op en deur haar trane sien sy Josh in die gang. Hy staar na haar en sy mond is oop. Hy is in sy nagklere en sy oë is nog dik van die slaap.

“Mamma? Wat is fout?” Hy kom in en kyk na haar.

Sy het hom wakker gemaak. Laura vee haar oë af en staan op haar knieë. Dis asof haar seuntjie se teenwoordigheid ’n sweempie normaliteit terugbring.

“Josh, my skat, kom hier.” Sy hou haar arms uit en wag totdat hy by haar is.

Hy slaan sy arms om haar nek en hou haar ’n paar sekondes lank styf vas. Toe los hy haar en kyk na die televisieskerm. “Wow.” Die beeld is weer dié van die torings, die vuurbolle en swart rook wat uit die geboue borrel. Josh bestudeer die toneel vir ’n paar oomblikke terwyl Laura haar asem ophou. Hy het al genoeg foto’s van Manhattan gesien om die plek te herken. Hy kyk terug na Laura. “Mamma, is dit New York?”

Laura sluk en kyk reguit in haar kind se oë; dan sak sy weer op die vloer neer. Sy moet hom vertel; sy het nie ’n keuse nie. Buitendien, die kanaal is besig om die toneel van die passasiersvliegtuig wat in die suidelike toring vasvlieg, te herhaal. “Ja.” Sy neem sy klein handjie in hare. “Twee vliegtuie het in die geboue vasgevlieg, Josh.”

Hy kyk weer na die televisie. “Is dit waar Pappa is?”

Dis asof sy nie genoeg asem het om te praat nie, maar sy dwing die woorde oor haar lippe. “Ja, my skat. Hy is iewers daarbinne.”

“In die ...” Hy raak bleek en knip sy oë twee maal. Hy kyk weer na Laura. “In die ontploffing? Is dit waar Pappa is?”

“Nee.” Laura skud haar kop met heftige, vinnige bewegings. Asof Eric op ’n manier sal oorleef as sy net seker genoeg klink. “Nee, Pappa is nie in die ontploffing nie. Sy kantoor is nie so hoog in die gebou nie.” Haar woorde klink onnatuurlik, asof iemand anders dit sê. Sy het geen idee of sy die waarheid praat nie. *Waar is hy, Here ... hoekom wil hulle nie sê op watter vloere die brand is nie?*

Josh sit kruisbeen op die mat langs Laura. “Dis die grootste vuur wat ek nog ooit gesien het.”

“Ek ook.” Laura wil skree. Sy wil opspring en begin hardloop en die mure slaan of iemand in New York bel en vra waar Eric is, wat met hom aangaan. Maar sy moet aan Josh dink. Sy tuit haar mond en blaas haar asem twee maal vinnig uit. Toe dink sy aan iets. Sy kan Murphy van die Woodland Hills-kantoor bel en vra of hy van Eric gehoor het. Haar man is pynlik georganiseerd. Murphy se nommer sal ongetwyfeld in die telefoonboek in Eric se lessenaarlaai wees.

Sy spring op, gryp die telefoon en soek koersagtig deur die laai. Dit moet hier wees. Haar hande bewe nie meer so erg toe sy die M-afdeling bereik nie. Waar is dit? Kom nou ... Murphy ... Murphy ... Murphy.

Daar staan dit. Drie nommers – ’n kantoonummer, selnummer en huisnummer.



“Wat doen Mamma?” Josh volg haar bewegings senuweeagtig.

“Ek wil Pappa se vriend bel.” Sy slaag daarin om haar stem egalig te hou. “Hy sal dalk weet waar Pappa is.”

Sy druk die nommers so vinnig moontlik en hou die telefoon teen haar oor. Murphy antwoord op die tweede lui. “Hallo?”

“Haai ... dis Laura Michaels.”

Hy swyg net ’n breukdeel van ’n sekonde. “Kyk jy televisie?”

“Ja.” Laura baklei teen die lighoofdigheid. “Ek het met Eric gepraat toe die ... toe die vliegtuig hulle gebou getref het.”

“Ek’s jammer, Laura.” Murphy se stem is stokkerig, onnatuurlik. Die hele gesprek, die tonele op televisie, alles voel asof dit met iemand anders gebeur.

“Het jy iets van hom gehoor? Nadat dit gebeur het, bedoel ek.” Toe die woorde uit is, besef sy hoe absurd sy klink. Natuurlik het Murphy nie van Eric gehoor nie. Die oomblik toe die vliegtuig hulle tref, was die telefone dood. Nogtans wag sy vir Murphy se antwoord in die hoop dat hy iets weet wat sy nie weet nie.

“Hy het nie gebel nie.” Murphy wag ’n oomblik. “Maar hy is oukei, Laura. Ons moet dit glo.”

’n Sprankie hoop vlam in haar op. “Hoe... ... hoekom sê jy so?”

“Hulle sê oor die nuus dat die vliegtuig die agt-en-sewentigste vloer getref het. Koppel & Grant is op die vier-en-sestigste. Die vuur het waarskynlik al ondertoe versprei, maar ons ouens is laag genoeg. Hulle behoort te kan uitkom.”

In haar geestesoog sien Laura hoe Eric en die ander personeel hulle na die hysbakke haas. Maar dis moontlik dat die hysbakke nie werk nie. In daardie geval sal daar nou ’n histeriese samedromming by die trapkuil wees. Dis absurd. Vier-en-sestig verdiepings! Eric sal die afwaartse klim dalk kan hanteer, maar wat van die ouer mans en vroue wat daarbo werk? “Eric weet dat ek bekommerd is. Hoe lank sal dit hom neem om daar uit te kom?”

“Een van die verslaggewers sê die mense ontruim teen ’n gemiddeld van een vloer per minuut. So ek weet nie. Dit sal minstens ’n uur wees.”

“Hoe lank gelede was dit?” Laura leun swaar op die lessenaar. Dit voel asof die vloer in jellie verander het, nes die keer toe hulle gebied deur ’n ligte aardbewing getref is. Laura maak haar oë toe om die naarheid af te weer.

“Die gebou is net na nege getref.” Murphy bly stil. “Dis nou presies kwart oor.”

Laura maak haar oë oop en neem Josh se hand in hare terwyl sy die som maak. “Hy behoort my dus so tienuur se kant te bel. Nê?”

Murphy is stil. “Die hele Manhattan is in chaos, Laura. Ek sal hom langer tyd gee. Wie weet, die hele plek se telefone is dalk uit.”

“Maar hy sal seker sy selfoon hê. Eric hou altyd sy selfoon by hom.”

“Het jy al probeer om hom op sy sel in die hande te kry?” Murphy klink moeg.

Die vertrek begin om haar draai. Josh kyk met groot, ronde oë na haar, maar

daar is niks wat sy nou daaraan kan doen nie. Sy druk met haar vuus op haar maag, enigiets om die naarheid te onderdruk. Dit kan nie gebeur nie. Dis net 'n verskriklike droom. Sy gaan nou enige oomblik wakker word en alles gaan normaal wees. Sy onthou van Murphy aan die ander kant. "Jammer, wat het jy gevra?"

"Van Eric se selfoon?"

"O, ja. Ek het probeer. Ek kon nie deurkom nie."

"Miskien moet jy nader aan tienuur weer probeer."

"Goed. Ek sal. Dankie, Murphy." Laura kyk na Josh, maar hy sit weer voor die televisie, sy oë vasgenaël op die aaklige beelde. "Ek moet gaan."

"Hy's oukei, Laura."

"Bid, Murphy. Bid vir hom, sal jy?" Laura het nie die vaagste benul of Murphy 'n gelowige is of nie, maar dit maak nie saak nie. Op hierdie oomblik vermoed sy amper die hele Amerika glo in gebed.

"Ek sal bid. Bel my as jy enigiets hoor."

Laura lui af en gaan terug na Josh toe. Dit maak nie saak hoe sy voel en of sy flou word nie. Sy moet Josh van die televisie af wegkry. Hierdie soort beelde kan lewenslange letsels op 'n seuntjie laat. Veral as Eric ...

Sy verwerp die gedagte. "Ek dink dis tyd om te gaan aantrek, my skat."

Hy knik afwesig sonder om sy oë van die televisie weg te neem. "Nou wanneer gaan hulle dan die vuur blus?"

"Hulle het waarskynlik klaar begin."

Hy kyk na haar. "Bedoel Mamma van binne af?"

"Mmm." Haar maag trek saam. Die brandweermanne kon onmoontlik al tot daar gevorder het. In albei torings is die vlamme duidelik buite beheer. En as daar nie gou genoeg water kom nie, sal die brand versprei ...

"Hulle sal die vuur doodmaak, nè, Mamma? Die brandweermanne weet moes hoe, nè?"

Dis die eerste keer dat Laura daaraan dink. Die brandweermanne sal water op die grond hê, maar op die sewentigste, tagtigste of negentigste verdiepings? Hoe op aarde gaan hulle daarin slaag om so 'n groot vuur so hoog in die lug te blus? Josh wag vir 'n antwoord. Laura gee sy hand 'n sagte drukkie. "Ja, my seun. Hulle sal." Sy leun vooroor en al skop alles in haar daarteen, skakel sy die televisie af. "Pappa sal oor so 'n uur bel en alles vir ons vertel."

Laura neem Josh na sy kamer toe en help hom om 'n kortbroek en T-hemp aan te trek. Hy vra aanhoudend vrae oor brandweermanne en kilometer lange brandslange en hemelhoë lere. Sy doen haar bes om hom te antwoord, maar die verskriklikste gedagtes bly by haar spook.

Sê nou die brand versprei deur die trapkuil? Sê nou Eric en die mense by hom is vasgekeer en kan nie uit nie? En sê nou die vlamme het na die vloere onder die ongelukstoneel versprei? Selfs tot by die vier-en-sestigste vloer? Sê nou 'n uur gaan verby en sy hoor nie van Eric nie?

*Here ... neem hierdie aaklige gedagtes weg. Asseblief ... Help my om te glo dat Eric oukei is. Wees met hom, help hom om uit die gebou te kom en bring*

*hom huis toe, Here. Ek smeeK U ...*

Toe is dit asof daar in haar binneste gefluister word: *Moenie op jou eie insigte staatmaak nie, my dogter ...*

Maar die woorde vervaag in 'n mis van paniekerige vrae. Sê nou hulle kan die water nie tot daar kry nie? Sê nou ...

Sodra sy deur die lys vrae in haar gedagtes gewerk het, begin sy van voor af.

Sê nou die brand het deur die trapkuil versprei? Sê nou Eric en die ander is vasgekeer en kan nie uit nie? En uiteindelik die mees angswekkende vraag.

Die een wat haar keel laat toetrek terwyl sy vir Josh ontbyt maak.

Sê nou sy sien nooit weer vir Eric nie?

# Chapter TEN

SEPTEMBER 11, 2001, 9:17 A.M.

The orders were given just before the second plane hit. All units respond to the World Trade Center except Engine 57 and Ladder 96. Those two units would be on standby, in case a fire broke out somewhere else in the city. Jake and the rest of the men at his station were frustrated about the order from the beginning.

But Captain Maxwell was outraged. He got on the phone immediately and called headquarters. “I don't care what the orders are, it's crazy to keep us here.” He paced the length of the station, shouting into the receiver. “The people in that building need every available firefighter on site if we're going to save lives!”

After the south tower was struck, Maxwell became downright furious. Jake watched the man storm across the kitchen, into the dining room, out toward the front room, and back again.

Jake understood completely. For him to sit by and watch a fire of any kind was like trying not to breathe. He sat beside Larry, his back stiff, his feet tapping out an urgent rhythm. This was the worst fire New York had ever seen. No, it was bigger than that. Jake stared at the TV screen and the thick black smoke bursting from the World Trade Center. It was one of the worst disasters in the nation's history. Jake knew the numbers; they all did. At any given time there could be as many as twenty thousand people in the World Trade Center towers. If every firefighter in a twenty-mile radius showed up at the scene, they'd still be severely stretched for manpower.

It was all he and Larry and the others could do to obey the orders. But they had to wait until the call came in, so that's what they did. Jake and Larry and the other men—everyone from both the night and day shift—sat at the dining room picnic tables watching the unfolding terror on TV and waiting.

Maxwell was still pacing the floor, talking on the phone, yelling at someone from headquarters. His language was worse than Jake had heard it in a while. "Listen to me, I don't care. If someone doesn't call us out, I'll send the men myself. This is our city's single worst mo--"

Jake tuned the man out. He'd called Jamie twice and left brief messages both times, saying he'd try her again in a few minutes. She was probably at the gym with Sierra, but she should've been home by now. He slipped away from the table, snapped open his cell phone, and hit redial.

Two rings ... three ... four. The answering machine clicked on, and Jamie's voice sounded over the line. At the tone Jake cleared his throat. "Hi ... it's me again. Looks like we'll get the call here pretty soon, honey. Everything's going to be okay, Jamie. I love you and I'll be home tonight, I promise. God's with me. Oh yeah, and my angel. Can't forget about him." He paused, hoping she'd walk through the door of their home any minute and pick up the phone. His throat was thick, but he kept his voice upbeat. "So, I'll see you later, all right? And, sweetheart, tell Sierra I love her."

He snapped the phone shut, slipped it in his pants pocket, and returned to his spot at the table next to Larry. The pictures on TV showed the score. The fire was getting worse. Jake leaned close to his friend and whispered, "We've gotta get out there."

"I know." Larry glanced at him. "Did you get hold of Jamie?"

"No." Jake swallowed hard. "Left a better message this time, though." He tapped his fingers on the worn wood table. "What about Sue? Did you call her?"

"Yep. She's watching it at home." Larry looked back at the television and squinted. "Scared to death."

"Wherever Jamie is, I'm sure she's panicking. Probably tearing across the island to get home. Fires scare her anyway. This one ..." Jake shot a look at the screen. "This one will terrify her."

Larry was quiet for a moment. "Hey, JB ..." He narrowed his gaze and kept it locked on the television. "Ever think about how hot jet fuel

burns?”

“Yeah.” A close-up of the fire flashed on the TV. Jake took a swig of his coffee and grimaced. “A hundred times since the first plane hit.”

“What do you think those buildings can take, you know, heat-wise?”

Jake turned to Larry once more. “I’m trying not to think about it. Jamie’s the worrier in our family.”

“I don’t know.” Larry shook his head. “I’ve never seen a fire like that in my life. We wouldn’t be breathing if we weren’t worried.” He looked at Jake again. “What about you, JB ... aren’t you even a little scared?”

“No.” Jake clenched his teeth. His answer was quick, automatic. “My family’s been fighting fires since before I was born. Fear isn’t part of it.”

“You called Jamie three times in five minutes.” Larry lowered his head so the others couldn’t hear him. “Come on, Jake, be honest with me, man. I mean, I want to get out there and fight the thing too. But I’m thinking about it this time.”

Nearly a minute passed while Jake processed the idea. It wasn’t fear, was it, this thing he was feeling? But then no one in three generations of Bryan firefighters had ever faced a fire like this one. A sigh came from deep within Jake. “All right.” He folded his hands so tightly his knuckles turned white. They were cold and clammy. “I feel it. I keep asking myself why this fire scares me. I’m not afraid to die, so what is it?” His hands trembled just barely as he reached into his back pocket and pulled out his wallet. He flipped it open. There was a picture of Sierra from a few months ago, and one of Jamie and him taken last summer. With careful fingers he traced the outline of her face and then Sierra’s. “It’s this. That’s what scares me.”

“Yep.” Larry nodded slow and deliberate. “I know.”

“Back when I first joined the department, I never thought about the size of a fire or whether I was in danger. You didn’t either. We didn’t have wives and little girls back then.” Jake returned the wallet and let his eyes meet Larry’s. “But now ... we have so much to lose.”

Larry didn't say anything, and for a moment they both were quiet. Jake remembered something. Six months ago Sierra pasted a photo of herself onto a piece of paper and then carefully printed her name beneath it. "Here, Daddy ... this is for you," she'd told him. "For your desk at work."

But Jake's work didn't require a desk. So he'd taped the photo complete with her printed name onto the inside of his helmet. The picture had been with him, against the top of his head, every call he'd taken since then. A reminder of why he had to be careful, why he couldn't afford a single mistake on the job.

It was like he'd just told Larry. He had too much to lose.

Larry broke the moment by jabbing an elbow into Jake's ribs. "Okay, JB, sorry. Enough of that." He managed a crooked, determined grin. "No worries about the fire today, friend. You watch my back, and I'll watch yours. We'll put out some flames, save a few lives, and get back in time for dinner."

It was their motto, the thing they'd said to each other every time they'd taken a call together. No worries. Put out some flames ... save a few lives ... back in time for dinner. Jake returned the grin and settled his gaze on the TV.

The image switched to a harried reporter who was shouting above the sirens and chaos coming from the streets of lower Manhattan. The Port Authority had closed all bridges and tunnels leading into New York City. "The latest reports say that the attacks on the World Trade Center were definitely intentional." The man's gaze darted to a sheet of paper in his hand. "President Bush is calling it a terrorist act of unequaled proportion and—"

Suddenly, Maxwell burst into the room, his eyes wide. "Okay, men, it's our turn. Both units to the south tower. There's a control post in the lobby. We'll report there and be assigned a floor." He paused. "None of the elevators are working. We'll be walking up, so pace yourself. At this point everyone above the seventy-eighth floor is trapped and needs assistance."

The moment Maxwell stopped speaking, Jake and seventeen men seated around the two picnic tables snapped into action, racing for their respective trucks, grabbing helmets and doubling up on nearly every seat so the men from both shifts would fit. Jake stared at the picture of Sierra taped to the inside of his helmet, then he put it firmly on his head and squeezed into the backseat of Engine 57, between Larry and a guy from the night crew.

*God ... be with us ... get us home safely.*

*I will be with you, son, always ... always even until the end.*

The words were part of a verse, one Jake had memorized years ago. They flashed in his mind as the sirens on both trucks pierced the air and joined those sounding across the city. Jake steeled himself for the task ahead, for the horrific sights he would no doubt see.

*This is the big one, God ... we're gonna need You.*

*Always, son ... I'm with you always even until the end.*

Jake clenched his fists and stared at the buildings as they rushed past. He always prayed en route to a fire. It was something that came as naturally as stepping into his turnouts or finding his place on the truck. Prayer was simply part of going to a fire. And always God's peace and strength and assurance came as he prayed, giving Jake an invisible armor to go along with his uniform.

But rarely did a Scripture flash in his mind.

They rounded a corner and Jake held on. The streets were empty except for emergency vehicles, so they were making better time than usual. He closed his eyes for a moment. The Scripture was from the book of Matthew, the place where Jake had been doing his morning Bible study for the past few weeks. Comforting words, words filled with promise. Jesus would be with him always even until the end of the age.

It was the last part that seemed somehow more profound.

The Lord would be with him until the end.

Jake shifted and gazed out the windshield of the fire truck. Profound



or maybe prophetic. The truck raced through an intersection, and Jake shook off the strange thoughts. He was psyching himself out, imagining warnings where none lay. This was a bad fire, but it was still a fire. And fighting fires was something he was trained to do. The dangers were the same as with any other call, weren't they? He glanced at Larry sitting beside him, but his friend's eyes were glazed over—the way they always were when he was mentally preparing himself for the call.

What had Larry said earlier about the temperature of jet fuel and the strength of the World Trade Center? Jake blinked and the questions disappeared. There was no point worrying. He had a job to do, and his body pulsed with adrenaline over the prospect. He couldn't wait to get it done. They were two blocks away when Maxwell—who was sitting in the front passenger seat of the fire truck—turned around and briefed them on the scene.

“Jet fuel shot through the elevator shaft a few seconds after both crashes.” He hesitated. “Some folks fell to their deaths. Others jumped. Many of them were on fire. Falling bodies have already claimed the lives of some of our men, so watch your step.”

Jake swallowed hard and resisted the urge to ask which men. It didn't matter. FDNY was a fraternity, and all of them were connected in one way or another. The losses they'd suffer individually and as a group that day would be too great to fathom. Especially with the fire still out of control.

They sped the remaining distance, turned onto West Street, and pulled up alongside another engine. Maxwell's warning could not have prepared Jake for the scene at the base of the south tower. Bodies were still falling from the upper floors, and Jake caught the expression of terror on a woman as she plummeted from the building. He looked away just as a thud echoed across the street.

The thud of her body hitting the ground.

*God ... it's a nightmare. Help those people ... please.*

He stared at the street around them and gritted his teeth. It looked like

something from a battlefield. Bodies lay strewn along the pavement, firefighters scrambled in a dozen different directions, and burn victims on stretchers were being carried to an endless line of waiting ambulances and paramedics.

Anger joined the emotions raging in Jake's soul. What type of monster would orchestrate mass murder on this level? And how dare they take aim at the heart of New York City? Jake and the others piled out of the truck, grabbed air tanks, and jogged toward the lobby of the south tower.

“Watch the sky!” Maxwell shouted over his shoulder.

The men did as he said, and Jake was struck by how macabre the moment was. With so many lives at stake in the building and outside it, the jumpers had become one more kind of hazardous debris. They could do nothing to help the falling people, so they directed all their effort to avoid them. Jake gritted his teeth and jogged with the others across the street.

On the way he nearly tripped over something bulky, something he first assumed was a piece of the building. Not until he was just past it did he stop, turn around, and stare once more. The thing he'd almost fallen over was not a windowsill or a chunk of debris. It was a body, burned completely beyond recognition. In the span of a single second, Jake glanced around. He couldn't count the number of bodies lining the streets.

“Come on, JB, there's work to do.” Larry was a few steps in front of him.

Jake inhaled sharply through his nose and kept walking. “Right behind you.” Certainly Larry had seen the same thing he'd seen. But Larry was right. They could take care of the dead later. Right now their job was in the building, not outside it. Both of their units entered the lobby and reported in at the command post. Battalion chiefs were manning the station using chalkboards to keep track of men assigned to various floors.

Maxwell stepped up and spoke for the group. “Engine 57, Ladder 96 here. Where do you want us?”

Jake could hear the captain talking with his peers, making decisions

about where they would be assigned. “We need a staging area on the sixty-first floor. We think one of the elevators there is working, and we want to use it to transport victims to the ground. Other units are on their way up to the crash site, so have your men establish sixty-one. No elevators are being used to go up, so you’ll have to walk.”

“Got it.” Maxwell nodded and moved the group across the lobby. There were so many firefighters taking and giving orders, Jake had to strain to hear his captain. “Everyone have air?” He gave a quick look at the line of men in front of him. Each of them had the mandatory tank, and several of them had two. A second one was optional. The weight of two would make it harder to climb, but an extra air tank could also save a firefighter’s life.

Jake took two.

“Let’s split up. It’ll be easier to stay together if something happens.” He motioned to the other captain on duty—Captain Hisel. “Take the ladder company and look for victims along the way. Have your men take any victims back to the street and the waiting ambulances.” He looked at Jake and Larry. “I’ll take the engine crew.” Maxwell started toward the main stairwell. “Follow me.”

Inside was a narrow set of stairs that would eventually lead them to the sixty-first floor. A quiet stream of people, their faces etched in shock and terror, streamed down one side of the steps. Company presidents and lowly assistants were on equal footing here as each of them continued moving, desperate to escape the burning building.

Maxwell turned around. “They want us to average one flight a minute.” He leveled an intense gaze at them. “I say we average two.”

Jake and Larry were behind Maxwell, and the group of them began attacking the stairs. Most of them were in excellent condition. Even with their equipment, a flight of stairs every thirty seconds would be manageable. At least for the first twenty floors or so.

At the first landing Jake realized something he hadn’t before. The

building was vibrating. Not badly, but it was moving some all the same, as though the entire hundred-story structure was shuddering in response to the inferno raging far above them. Of all the times he'd been in one of the World Trade Center towers, Jake had never felt the building tremble. He blinked and focused on his feet. The building could handle that type of heat, couldn't it? They kept walking.

Two floors, three, four ... six ... eight ...

Jake's mind began to wander. Steel became compromised at a certain point, but in the confusion of the stairwell, Jake couldn't remember what temperature that happened at. Five thousand degrees? Ten thousand? And exactly how hot did jet fuel burn? Had anyone thought to protect these towers against that type of heat?

Once more Jake dismissed the thought and focused his attention on the people heading down the stairs. He wanted to be available if any of them had breathing trouble or needed help. He caught fragments of their conversations.

"Frank ... hang in there, we're almost out." It was a woman, her eyes wide as she kept pace behind a heavysset man with a red face.

Maxwell heard the conversation. "What floor you people from?"

"Fifty-two." The woman stopped even with Maxwell. She put her hand on the heavy man and frowned. "I'm worried about Frank. He has heart trouble."

"I'm fine." The man was short of breath, but he kept walking. He waved back at Maxwell and the rest of them. "God bless you people ... There's hundreds more upstairs. Don't worry about me."

A cry came from somewhere above them. "Keep moving, people, please!"

The worried woman and the heavysset man began walking again, and the woman yelled over her shoulder. "How many more floors?"

"Eight." Maxwell moved ahead. "Keep walking."

Jake tried to calculate what they'd find when they reached the sixty-

first floor. The building had been burning for about half an hour now. Seconds counted for any critical victims at or above the crash site. And if the stairwells were cut off at the seventy-eighth floor, what did that mean for the people trapped above it?

Again, Jake focused on the matter at hand. Ten floors ... eleven ... twelve ... thirteen. They were making great time, taking three floors a minute. The tanks were heavy on Jake's back, and he was sucking air, feeling the exertion of the climb. *God, get us up there in time to help those people ... please. And keep us safe too, Lord. We're going to need it.* He remembered the line he and Larry liked to say on the way to a fire. Their motto. *No worries. Put out some flames ... save a few lives ... back in time for dinner.*

It had been true every other time they'd taken a call. Jake could only pray it would be true today.

## Tien

11 September 2001 09:17

Hulle ontvang die opdrag net voordat die tweede toring getref word. Alle eenhede word na die World Trade Center uitgeroep, behalwe Enjin 57 en Leer 96. Hulle moet bystaan vir ingeval daar elders in die stad 'n brand uitbreek. Jake en die res van die span is erg gefrustreerd.

Maar kaptein Maxwell is briesend. Hy het dadelik 'n oproep na hoofkantoor gemaak. "Ek gee nie om wat die opdrag is nie, dis belaglik om ons hier te hou." Hy het op en af geloop en in die telefoon geskel. "Ons het elke beskikbare brandweerman op die toneel nodig as ons die mense in daardie gebou wil red."

Ná die suidelike toring getref is, was Maxwell buite homself van woede. Jake kyk hoe die man deur die kombuis en eetkamer na die voorste vertrek marsjeer en terug.

Jake het volkome begrip. Om te sit en na 'n brand van enige aard te kyk, is soos om te probeer om nie asem te haal nie. Die spanning vreet aan hom waar hy nou langs Larry sit, en hy tik onrustig met sy voete op die vloer. Dis die ergste brand wat New York al ooit gesien het. Nee, dis groter as dit. Jake kyk na die televisieskerm en die dik swart rook wat uit die World Trade Center borrel. Dis een van die grootste rampe in die nasie se geskiedenis. Jake ken die getalle; die res van die manne ook. Daar kan op enige bepaalde tyd meer

as twintigduisend mense in die World Trade Center wees. As elke brandweerman in 'n radius van dertig kilometer op die toneel aanmeld, sal daar steeds 'n geweldige tekort aan mannekrag wees.

Dis met inspanning dat hy en Larry en die ander die opdrag gehoorsaam. Maar hulle moet wag totdat hulle uitgeroep word. Jake en Larry en die ander mans – almal, ook die ouens van nagskof – sit by die eetkamertafels en kyk magteloos hoe die drama op die televisie ontvou.

Maxwell is steeds besig om met die foon teen sy oor heen en weer te loop. Hy gil op iemand van hoofkantoor. Sy taal is erger as wat Jake in 'n lang tyd gehoor het. “Luister na my, ek gee nie om nie. As iemand ons nie ontbied nie, sal ek die manne self stuur. Die stad is in 'n noodtoes.. –”

Jake sluit homself af. Hy het Jamie al twee keer gebel en albei kere kort boodskappe gelaat om te sê dat hy oor 'n paar minute weer sal probeer. Sy is waarskynlik saam met Sierra by die gimnasium, maar sy moes nou al by die huis gewees het. Hy glip weg, klik sy selfoon oop en bel weer.

Twee luie ... drie ... vier. Die antwoordmasjien met Jamie se stem klink in sy oor. Ná die toon maak Jake keel skoon. “Haai ... dis weer ek. Lyk my ons gaan binnekort uitgeroep word, my lief. Alles gaan oukei wees, Jamie. Ek is lief vir jou en sal vanaand by die huis wees, ek belowe. Die Here is by my. O ja, en my engel. Ek mag nie van hom vergeet nie.” Hy bly stil in die hoop dat sy nou by die deur gaan instap en die telefoon optel. Daar is 'n knop in sy keel, maar hy hou sy stem opgeruimd. “Dan sien ek jou later vanaand, oukei? Sê vir Sierra ek's lief vir haar, my skat.”

Hy maak die foon toe, bêre dit in sy broeksak en gaan sit weet by die tafel langs Larry. Op die televisie is dit duidelik dat die vlamme besig is om handuit te ruk. Jake leun oor na sy vriend en fluister: “Ons moet daar uitkom.” “Ek weet.” Larry kyk vlugtig na hom. “Kon jy Jamie in die hande kry?” “Nee.” Jake sluk swaar. “Maar ek het hierdie keer 'n beter boodskap gelaat.” Hy trommel met sy vingers op die verweerde houtblad. “Wat van Sue? Het jy haar gebel?”

“Ja. Sy kyk by die huis.” Larry kyk weer na die televisie en skreef sy oë. “Sy is doodbang.”

“Ek weet nie waar Jamie is nie, maar sy sal in 'n toestand wees. Sy het in elk geval 'n vrees vir brande. Hierdie een ...” Jake kyk na die televisieskerm. “Ek weet nie hoe sy hierdie een gaan maak nie.”

Vir 'n oomblik is Larry stil. “Hei, JB ...” Hy vernou sy oë sonder om van die skerm weg te kyk. “Het jy al gedink hoe warm vliegtuigbrandstof brand?”

“Ja.” 'n Nabyskoot van die vlamme verskyn op die televisie. Jake neem 'n sluk koffie en grys. “Honderde kere vandat die eerste vliegtuig getref het.”

“Hoeveel dink jy kan daardie geboue hanteer? Hittegewys, bedoel ek?”

Jake draai weer na Larry. “Ek probeer om nie daaraan te dink nie. In ons huis is Jamie die een wat haar loop en bekommer.”

“Ek weet nie.” Larry skud sy kop. “Ek het nog nooit sulke vlamme gesien nie. Ek dink nie dis moontlik om hier te sit en nié bekommerd te wees nie.” Hy

kyk weer na Jake. “Wat van jou, JB ... is jy nie eens ’n bietjie bang nie?” “Nee.” Jake byt op sy tande. Sy antwoord was vinnig, outomaties. “Ek het met ’n pa grootgeword wat in die brandweer was. Daar is nie plek vir vrees nie.”

“Jy het Jamie die laaste vyf minute drie maal gebel.” Larry laat sak sy kop sodat die ander hom nie kan hoor nie. “Kom nou, Jake, wees eerlik met my. Ek bedoel, ek brand ook om daar te kom en my werk te doen. Maar hierdie keer dink ek twee keer daaroor.”

Daar gaan amper ’n minuut verby terwyl Jake hieroor nadink. Hierdie gevoel ... dit kan tog nie vrees wees nie? Maar aan die ander kant, nie een van die drie geslagte brandweermanne in sy familie het ooit voor so iets te staan gekom nie. Hy sug diep. “Nou goed.” Hy klem sy hande so styf in mekaar dat die kneukels wit word. Sy handpalms is koud en klam. “Ek is bang. Ek bly my afvra hoekom hierdie brand my bangmaak. Ek is nie bang vir die dood nie; so wat is dit?” Sy hande bewe effentjies toe hy sy beursie uit sy agtersak haal en oopmaak. Daar is ’n foto van Sierra van ’n paar maande gelede, en een van hom en Jamie wat die vorige somer geneem is. Sy voorvinger volg die buitelyne van haar en Sierra se gesigte. “Dis hulle. Dis hoekom ek bang is.”

“Jip.” Larry knik stadig en beslis. “Ek weet.”

“Toe ek destyds by die brandweer aangesluit het, het ek nooit gedink aan die grootte van ’n vuur en of ek in gevaar is nie. Jy ook nie. Ons het toe nog nie ’n vrou en klein dogtertjies gehad nie.” Jake steek die beursie weer in sy sak en sy oë ontmoet Larry s’n. “Maar nou ... ons het soveel om te verloor.”

Larry sê niks nie, en vir ’n oomblik is dit stil tussen hulle. Jake dink aan iets. Ses maande gelede het Sierra ’n foto van haarself op ’n stukkie papier geplak en haar naam onderaan geskryf. “Hierso, Pappa ... ek het dit vir Pappa gemaak. Dis vir Pappa se lessenaar by die werk.”

Maar Jake het nie ’n lessenaar vir sy werk nodig nie. Hy het die foto, kompleet met haar naam en al, binne-in sy helm geplak. Sedertdien is die foto altyd by hom, dra hy dit elke keer bokant sy kop wanneer hy uitgeroep word. Asof om hom daaraan te herinner dat hy versigtig moet wees, dat hy dit nie kan bekostig om een fout by die werk te maak nie.

Dis soos hy sopas vir Larry gesê het. Daar is te veel op die spel.

Larry onderbreek Jake se gedagtes deur hom met die elmboog in die ribbes te pomp. “Ek’s jammer. Genoeg hiervan.” Hy gee ’n skewe, vasberade glimlag. “Ons gaan nie nou begin bang word nie. Ons hou mos ’n oog oor mekaar. Ons gaan ’n vuur doodmaak, ’n paar lewens red en betyds vir aandete by die huis wees.”

Dit het al soos ’n leuse geword wat hulle elke keer vir mekaar sê wanneer hulle saam uitgeroep word. ’n Vuur doodmaak ... ’n paar lewens red ... betyds vir aandete by die huis wees. Jake beantwoord sy glimlag en kyk weer na die televisie.

Die beeld het na ’n vervaarde verslaggewer oorgeskakel wat moet gil om bo die sirenes en chaos in die strate gehoor te word. Die hawebestuur het alle

brûe en tunnels na New York gesluit. “Volgens die jongste berigte was die aanval op die World Trade Center beslis beplan.” Die man se oë flits na ’n papier in sy hand. “President Bush noem dit ’n terroriste-aanval van ongeëwenaarde proporsies en ...”

Die volgende oomblik kom Maxwell by die vertrek ingestorm, sy oë groot. “Oukei, manne, dis ons beurt. Albei eenhede is na die suidelike toring uitgeroep. Daar is ’n beheerpunt in die portaal. Ons sal daar rapporteer waar ’n vloer aan ons toegewys sal word.” Hy bly stil. “Nie een van die hysbakke werk nie. Spaar julle kragte, want ons gaan trappe klim. Op hierdie tydstip is almal wat bo die agt-en-sewentigste vloer is, vasgekeer.”

Maxwell is nog besig om te praat, toe Jake en die sewentien mans in die vertrek reeds op hulle voete is. Hulle hardloop na hulle onderskeie waens, gryp hulle helms en gaan sit twee-twee op ’n sitplek sodat die mans van albei skofte inpas. Jake staar na die foto van Sierra aan die binnekant van sy helm, druk dit dan stewig op sy kop en gaan sit op die agtersitplek tussen Larry en ’n ou van nagskof.

*Here ... wees by ons ... bring ons veilig terug.*

*Ek is altyd by jou, my seun ... tot die einde.*

Die woorde kom uit ’n teksvers wat Jake jare gelede gememoriseer het. Dit flits deur sy gedagtes terwyl die sirenes van albei brandweerwaens deur die lug sny om by al die ander in die stad in te val. Jake staal hom vir dit wat voorlê, vir die verskriklike tonele wat hy gaan sien.

*Dit is die grote, Here ... ons gaan U nodig hê.*

*Altyd, my seun ... Ek is by jou tot aan die einde.*

Jake bal sy vuiste en staar na die geboue wat verbyflits. Hy bid altyd op pad na ’n brand. Dis so natuurlik soos om sy uniform aan te trek of sy plek op die brandweerwa in te neem. Gebed is eenvoudig deel van sy lewe. En wanneer hy so bid, word hy altyd deur God se vrede en krag en gerusstelling omvou, asof hy ’n onsigbare wapenrusting bo-oor sy fisiese uniform dra.

Maar dit gebeur selde dat ’n Bybelvers by hom opkom.

Hulle jaag om ’n hoek en Jake hou vas. Buiten ’n paar noodvoertuie is die strate leeg; dus vorder hulle vinniger as gewoonlik. Hy maak sy oë vir ’n oomblik toe. Die woorde kom uit Matteus, die gedeelte waaruit Jake die afgelope paar weke Bybelstudie doen. vertroostende woorde, ’n belofte. Jesus sal al die dae tot aan die einde by hom wees.

Dis die laaste gedeelte wat om die een of ander rede meer treffend is.

Die Here sal tot aan die einde by hom wees.

Jake versit effens en tuur deur die ruit. Treffend of dalk profeties. Hulle jaag oor ’n kruising en Jake skuif die vreemde gedagtes opsy. Sy gedagtes is op hol en hy verbeel hom waarskuwings waar daar nie is nie. Dit is ’n groot brand, maar dit bly ’n brand. En hy is opgelei om vure te blus. Die gevare wat hulle vandag gaan trotseer, is nes dié van enige ander. Hy kyk onderlangs na Larry, maar daar is ’n waas oor sy vriend se oë – soos altyd wanneer hy hom geestelik op ’n brand voorberei.



Wat het Larry vroeër van die brandstoftemperatuur en die World Trade Center gesê? Jake knip sy oë asof hy die vrae sodoende kan uitsluit. Dit gaan nie help om hom te bekommer nie. Daar is werk wat gedoen moet word en die adrenalien pols by voorbaat deur sy liggaam. Hy kan nie wag om aan die werk te kom nie. Hulle is twee blokke weg toe Maxwell – wat op die brandweerwa se voorste passasiersitplek sit – omdraai en hulle op hoogte van die toneel bring.

“’n Paar sekondes ná albei ontploffings het die hysbakskagte aan die brand geslaan.” Hy aarsel. “’n Paar mense het na hulle dood geval. Ander het gespring. Baie van hulle was aan die brand. ’n Paar van ons manne is reeds dood toe hulle deur vallende liggame getref is; wees dus versigtig.”

Jake sluk swaar en onderdruk die begeerte om te vra wie dit was. Dit maak nie saak nie. Die brandweer in New York is ’n broederskap, en al hierdie mans is op die een of ander manier onderling verbind. Die verliese wat hulle vandag individueel en as ’n groep gaan ly, is iets waaraan hy nie nou mag dink nie. En die brand is steeds buite beheer.

Hulle jaag die res van die pad tot by West Street en trek langs ’n ander brandweerwa af. Maxwell se waarskuwing kon Jake nie op die toneel onder die suidelike toring voorberei nie. Daar is steeds liggame wat uit die lug val, en Jake se oog vang die verskrikking op ’n vrou se gesig terwyl sy na benede stort. Hy kyk weg en daar is ’n dowwe slag.

Die geluid van haar liggaam wat die grond tref.

*Here ... dis ’n nagmerrie. Help hierdie mense ... asseblief.*

Hy kyk om hom rond en byt op sy tande. Dit lyk soos ’n slagveld. Die plaveisel is vol liggame, brandweermanne hardloop in verskillende rigtings en brandslagoffers word op draagbare na ’n lang ry wagtende ambulanse en paramedici gedra.

’n Skielike woede neem van Jake besit. Watter soort monster sal ’n massamoord van hierdie omvang organiseer? En hoe durf hulle die hart van New York hulle teiken maak? Jake en die ander spring uit die wa, gryp hulle suurstoftenks en draf na die suidelike toring se ingang.

“Kyk bo julle!” roep Maxwell oor sy skouer.

Die mans maak soos hy sê en Jake word deur die makabere realiteit getref. Te midde van die baie lewens wat binne- en buitekant die gebou op die spel is, het die springers nog een van die gevare geword. Hulle kan niks doen om die vallende mense te red nie; dus doen hulle hul bes om hulle te vermy. Jake byt op sy tande en draf saam met die ander oor die straat.

Op pad struikel hy amper oor ’n bonkige voorwerp, iets wat hy aanneem ’n stuk van die gebou is. Dis eers toe hy verby is dat hy vassteek, omdraai en weer kyk. Dis nie ’n vensterbank of stuk sement nie. Dis ’n liggaam, onherkenbaar verbrand. Jake se oë flits heen en weer. Hy kan nie die hoeveelheid liggame langs die strate tel nie.

“Kom, JB, ons het werk.” Larry is ’n paar treë voor hom.

Jake trek sy asem skerp in en begin weer draf. “Ek kom.” Larry moes dit ook

gesien het. Maar hy is reg. Hulle kan later na die dooies omsien. Op die oomblik lê hulle werk binne die gebou, nie buitekant nie. Albei eenhede meld by die beheerpunt in die portaal aan. Die stasie word deur bevelvoerders beman wat swartborde gebruik om rekord te hou van die mans wat na verskillende vloere uitgestuur word.

Maxwell gaan vorentoe en praat namens die groep. “Enjin 57, Leer 96 hier. Waar wil julle ons hê?”

Jake kan die bevelvoerder met sy kollegas hoor praat oor waar hulle uitgeplaas moet word. “Ons benodig ’n basis op die een-en-sestigste vloer. Ons dink een van die hysbakke daar werk, en ons wil slagoffers ondertoe bring. Die ander eenhede is almal op pad na die ongelukstoneel; ek wil jou manne op een-en-sestig hê. Geen hysbakke word gebruik om boontoe te gaan nie, so julle sal moet klim.”

“Reg so.” Maxwell knik en lei die groep na die oorkant van die portaal. Daar is so baie brandweermanne wat oor en weer bevele gee en ontvang dat Jake sy ore moet spits om sy kaptein te hoor. “Het almal suurstof?” Hy kyk na die ry manne voor hom. Elkeen van hulle het die verpligte tenk, en ’n paar van hulle het twee. ’n Tweede een is opsioneel. ’n Ekstra een sal dit moeiliker maak om te klim, maar ’n tweede suurstoftenk kan ook ’n brandweerman se lewe red.

Jake het twee gebring.

“Kom ons verdeel in twee groepe. Dit sal makliker wees om bymekaar te bly ingeval iets gebeur.” Hy beduie na die ander kaptein aan diens – kaptein Hisel. “Die Leer-eenheid gaan saam met jou. Kyk of julle slagoffers op pad boontoe kry en bring hulle uit.” Hy kyk na Jake en Larry. “Die ouens van Enjin kom saam met my.” Maxwell mik na die hooftrapkuil. “Volg my.”

Binnekant die kuil is ’n nou stel trappe wat hulle uiteindelik op die een-en-sestigste vloer sal uitbring. ’n Swyende ry mense, die skok en verskrikking op hulle gesigte afgeëts, kom aan die een kant van die trap afgestroom. Daar is vandag geen onderskeid tussen maatskappyhoofde en klerke nie; almal is ewe desperaat om uit die brandende gebou te kom.

Maxwell draai om. “Hulle wil hê ons moet een vloer per minuut klim.” Hy rig sy intense blik op hulle. “Ek sê ons maak dit twee.”

Jake en Larry is agter Maxwell en die groep begin verbete klim. Die meeste van hulle is in ’n uitstekende fisiese toestand. Ten spyte van hulle toerusting behoort hulle ’n stel trappe elke dertig sekondes te kan hanteer. Ten minste vir die eerste twintig vloere of wat.

Op die eerste trapportaal raak Jake vir die eerste keer daarvan bewus: Die gebou vibreer. Nie erg nie, maar voelbaar, asof die hele honderdverdieping-struktuur onder die inferno sidder wat ver bokant hulle woed. Jake was al dikwels in die World Trade Center, maar hy het die plek nog nooit voel vibreer nie. Hy knip sy oë en konsentreer op sy voete. Die gebou is tog veronderstel om hierdie soort hitte te kan hanteer, dan nie? Hulle hou aan klim.

Twee vloere, drie, vier ... ses ... agt ...

Jake se gedagtes begin dwaal. Staal buig wanneer dit 'n sekere hitte bereik, maar in die verwarring in die trapkuil kan Jake nie onthou teen watter temperatuur nie. Drieduisend grade? Vyfduisend? En presies hoe warm brand vliegtuigbrandstof? Het enigiemand daaraan gedink om die torings teen daardie soort hitte te beskerm?

Weer verwerp Jake hierdie gedagtes en bepaal hom by die mense wat afkom. Hy wil beskikbaar wees indien enige van hulle sukkel om asem te haal of hulp nodig het. Hy hoor fragmente van hulle gesprekke.

“Frank ... hou net uit, ons is amper daar.” Dis 'n vrou, haar oë groot, agter 'n swaarlywige man met 'n rooi gesig.

Maxwell hoor die gesprek. “Van watter vloer kom julle af?”

“Twee-en-vyftig.” Die vrou gaan staan op dieselfde trap as Maxwell. Sy plaas haar hand op die swaar man en frons. “Ek's bekommerd oor Frank. Hy het hartprobleme.”

“Ek makeer niks nie.” Die man is kortasem, maar hy hou aan loop. Hy wuif na Maxwell en sy groep. “Die Here seën julle ... Daar is nog honderde mense daarbo. Moenie oor my bekommerd wees nie.”

Iemand roep van bo af. “Hou aan beweeg, mense, asseblief!”

Die bekommerde vrou en swaargeboude man begin weer loop en die vrou gil oor haar skouer. “Hoeveel vloere nog?”

“Agt.” Maxwell het begin klim. “Vasbyt, manne.”

Jake probeer hom voorstel wat op die een-en-sestigste vloer op hulle wag. Die ontploffing het nou 'n halfuur gelede plaasgevind. Elke sekonde is van lewensbelang vir die slagoffers op of bokant die vloer wat deur die vliegtuig getref is. En as die trapkuil bokant die agt-en-sewentigste vloer in duie gestort het – wat dan van die mense wat bo vasgekeer is?

Jake dwing sy aandag na die hede. Tien vloere ... elf ... twaalf ... dertien. Hulle vorder goed teen drie vloere 'n minuut. Die suurstoftenks raak swaar, en Jake hyg na asem. *Here, help ons om betyds daar uit te kom om die mense te help ... asseblief. En bewaar ook vir ons, Here. Ons gaan dit nodig hê.* Hy dink aan die woorde wat hy en Larry altyd op pad na 'n brand vir mekaar sê. Hulle leuse. *Ons gaan 'n vuur doodmaak, 'n paar lewens red en betyds vir aandete by die huis wees.*

Dit was in die verlede altyd die geval. Jake kan maar net bid dat dit hierdie keer ook so sal wees.

# Chapter ELEVEN

SEPTEMBER 11, 2001, 9:22 A.M.

Eric Michaels could feel the building trembling.

It had started twenty minutes earlier with the explosion somewhere above him, a blast that had knocked Eric and everyone in the outside hallway to their knees. Immediately, his phone had gone dead, and at the same moment, Allen raced up to him. Together they ran into the main area where dozens of people were screaming at once. What had earlier been merely grave concern and alarm was now full-fledged panic.

“We've been hit! We've been—”

“A plane ... another plane! A plane went through the—”

“It was coming right at us, then it disappea—”

The voices had shouted simultaneously, and it had been impossible to make sense of any of them. What Eric and Allen had been able to get was the obvious. A second plane had crashed—into their building this time—and they needed to get out fast.

“Elevators are out!” Someone had screamed the news, and a mass of people headed for the stairwells. There were three in the building, and each of them would eventually connect with the lobby. Eric considered joining the group. After all, the battery on his cell phone was dead, and Laura would be waiting for his call. Probably frantic by now. TV news would be reporting that a second plane had crashed into the south tower, and she'd assume he was somehow in the middle of the carnage.

But just as he'd turned toward the stairs, someone grabbed his sleeve. Eric spun around and found himself inches from Allen. The man's brows were lowered almost over his eyelids. “Where are you going?”

Eric glanced at the stairs and then back at Allen. “We need to get out of here.”

“There's no hurry, Eric. The stairs will be packed with people.” Allen

cast a quick look back toward the office of Koppel and Grant. “I have three foreign transactions that have to be made now. Before the morning's up.”

Eric turned and stared at Allen. The man was crazy. “Can't you feel it?” His words ran together, and he had to fight to keep from jerking away and running for the stairs. Running for his life. “The place is shaking, Allen. We need to go.”

“Look.” Anger flashed in Allen's eyes. “Those crazy terrorists have done enough damage—they aren't going to ruin a couple hundred-thousand-dollar purchases on top of it.”

Eric's heart raced. He looked from Allen to the crowd at the stairwell and back at his boss again. It would take five minutes, ten even, for the crowd of people to file into the stairwell. Maybe Allen was right. “Okay.” He took off toward the office, and Allen fell in step beside him. “But let's make it fast.”

They rounded the corner through the door of Koppel and Grant and ran back to Allen's office. Allen worked the keyboard while Eric read from a handful of files. Ten minutes into the transaction, Hank Walden, one of their top financial managers, stuck his head in the office. “Guys, they've ordered an evacuation.” The man's eyes were wide, his breathing short and ragged. “Everyone has to go.”

Eric was about to say something when Allen held his hand up. “There's no smoke on this floor.” He kept his eyes on the screen. “We'll be finished in thirty minutes, forty at the most. We'll lose thousands if I wait on this.”

“Sir ...” Walden exchanged a desperate look with Eric. “We don't have a choice, sir. The building's in trouble.”

Allen waved him off without looking up. “This is the World Trade Center. The building's fine.” He shot a hurried look at Walden. “Go! We'll be right behind you.”

With a final terrified glance at Eric, Walden disappeared, his footsteps echoing down the hallway and out into the main corridor.

Eric stared at Allen. “Can't it wait, sir? No one else in New York City is working right now.”

Allen only pointed to the files in Eric's hands and kept typing. Ten more minutes passed and Eric felt something change, something in the way the building trembled. Maybe it was his imagination, but the shaking seemed worse, more noticeable. Eric glanced out the window at the chaos reigning six hundred feet below. Buildings like this one were on rollers, weren't they? That could explain the movement—especially with the inferno blazing above them. But what if that wasn't the reason the building was trembling? Sixty-four floors was an awful long way up.

Eric shuddered.

“Sir ...” He set the files on the desk and stood. “I'm going. I have a family to think about.”

Allen stopped typing and gave him a sad, disappointed frown. “I thought you were committed.”

Eric hated the way his boss's comment made him feel weak. He gave a single shake of his head. “I am committed, sir. I think we should both go. The building doesn't feel right.”

This time Allen sat back, crossed his arms, and directed his gaze at Eric. “You're not the man I thought you were, Eric.” He mumbled something under his breath as he looked back at the screen. Then without making eye contact with Eric again, he waved his hand. “Go ... join the others. I'll finish it by myself.”

Eric didn't waste time giving Allen a response. He turned and raced down the hallway, hurrying through the maze of desks and partition boards as he made for the stairs. Along the way he found a man in his early twenties typing frantically.

“What're you doing? The building's being evacuated.”

“No one ordered an evacuation.” The man's fingers kept moving. “I'm on a deadline.”

“Listen, pal.” Eric's tone was frantic. “Yes, they have ordered an

evacuation. The fire's headed this way.” Eric glanced at the wall, looking for the place where the computer was plugged in. The outlet was hidden by the man's desk, and Eric straightened and shouted at the man. “Get out!”

The man stopped typing and sent a vicious look at Eric. “It's my life. Leave me alone. I get a bonus if I finish this thing today.” He pursed his lips. “I'm not letting some fire twenty floors up stop me, you got that?”

Eric huffed and spun around, running once more for the stairs. Fine. If the guy wanted to stay, what was that to Eric? He reached the stairwell a minute later and yanked the door open. The place was empty, and he took the steps at a full trot. At the fifty-third floor he began seeing firemen trudging their way up.

“Anyone else up there?” one firefighter asked him.

“My boss ... he has a few transactions to finish.” Eric huffed, trying to catch his breath. “And a crazy guy on a deadline. Won't leave his desk.”

The firefighters nodded and continued up. They were breathing hard, carrying what looked like fifty pounds of equipment each and refusing to slow down in their quest to reach the fire. Eric resumed his pace, and at the forty-third floor, he caught up with the line of people, all moving steadily down the stairs one flight at a time. That's when he noticed something.

The shaking was getting worse; it wasn't his imagination.

He could hear windows rattling beyond the stairwell, feel a subtle sway from above. Eric kept up with the group, wishing they could walk faster. What did the building's movement mean? Were helicopters dropping water on the fire? Or were the flames enough to shake a hundred floors of cement and steel? Whatever the cause, Eric didn't want to think about it. There was nothing he could do, nothing any of them could do but keep taking the stairs.

One step at a time.

The businesspeople making their way down were orderly and calm. Probably in shock, Eric figured. He knew none of them, and the people from Koppel and Grant were probably twenty floors below him by now.

Eric tried to draw a deep breath but couldn't. The air in the stairwell was hot and thick and stale, tinged with a sense of barely controlled panic. Every time they cleared a landing, Eric would glance at the number on the door.

Thirty-one ... thirty ... twenty-nine ... twenty-eight ...

Six more floors and then it happened. Eric tripped on a briefcase left in the stairwell and tumbled face first down five steps. A piercing pain stabbed at his ankle, and he struggled to right himself. At that instant a hand reached out for him. Eric grabbed it, and as he worked to get his feet beneath him, a firefighter's helmet fell against his chest.

People were making their way down the stairs, still inching past Eric as he let the firefighter pull him to a sitting position. The man's helmet was near Eric's feet now, and he took hold of it. But just as he went to hand it back to the firefighter, something caught his attention, something inside the helmet. Eric peered at it and his heart skipped a beat.

It was a photograph of a little girl, four or five years old. And beneath the photo, in a child's printing, was written the name "Sierra." Both were taped firmly to the inside of the helmet. Eric felt a lump in his throat as he leaned up to return it. With people still making their way past him, Eric locked eyes on the firefighter and felt his breath catch in his throat.

The fireman was staring at him too. And now that Eric could see the man clearly, the reason was obvious. The two of them could've been twins. Identical twins, even. Eric blinked hard. Was he seeing things? He'd heard of strangers having an uncanny resemblance. But he'd never seen anyone who looked this much like him. Exactly like him. Not ever. The short dark hair, square jaw, high cheekbones, blue eyes. Even their builds were the same.

Looking at the firefighter was like looking in a mirror.

Eric's mouth hung open, and he couldn't look away. So far the entire incident had taken five seconds—more than either of them had. Eric rose to his feet, his eyes still glued to the firefighter's. "Thank you." He handed the



helmet out toward the man.

“That’s ... that’s my little girl.” The firefighter took his helmet back from Eric and set it on his head. “Better keep walking.”

“Thanks ...” Eric wanted to say more. He wanted to thank the man for helping him up after his fall, for risking his life for all of them, for doing what he was doing, even though it might cost him everything.

Including the chance to see his little Sierra again.

But the moment passed, and the firefighter nodded one last time as he continued his climb up into the building. Eric worked his way back into the stream of people heading down. His ankle hurt, but he could do nothing about it now. They had to get out of the shaking building.

Fifteen ... fourteen ... thirteen ...

Eric moved down the steps, but his mind was back on the twenty-second floor, back with the firefighter and the strange resemblance they shared. Something about the man’s expression and the picture of his little girl, Sierra, seemed permanently etched in Eric’s mind. It stayed with him, haunted him, made him certain that as long as he lived, he would remember forever the child’s face, the way her picture smiled at him from the inside of the firefighter’s helmet.

He reached floor number twelve ... eleven ... ten ...

What was it he’d seen in the firefighter’s eyes? A raw determination, an intense sort of focus to reach the victims on the upper floors regardless of the danger? Yes, that was it. And more than that, a peace. A peace that Eric knew nothing of.

Nine ... eight ... seven ...

Eric’s left ankle was numb now, and his heart raced within him from fear and exertion. But none of that mattered. The only thing he could think about was Sierra and her firefighter father. For a moment he thought about praying for the man. But then, what good would that do? The firefighter was going up, heading straight toward the inferno. And the building was shaking more now than before.

*He won't come out, will he, God? He's going to die, and Sierra won't ever see her daddy again. For what? The people upstairs are probably dead by now, anyway. Smoke and heat and fumes. Who could possibly live through the nightmare that had to be happening from the crash site up.*

Eric stopped moving for three heartbeats. Maybe he could run up and find the man, grab him, and insist he come down with the other sensible people. That way they could talk about their resemblance and compare notes. Were they related somehow? Was the man a distant cousin who had been born with identical features as Eric? If the firefighter continued making his way upstairs, Eric was almost certain he'd never know, never see the man again.

But there were too many people in the stairwell, and he had no choice but to keep moving down with the others. Six floors left, five ... The shaking was getting worse now, bending the stairwell as though it were made of rubber.

“Get us out of here!” one man shouted from three floors up. “The whole thing's coming down.”

*The whole thing?* Even with the shaking, that was an idea Eric hadn't considered. Could the World Trade Center actually collapse? An ominous creaking came from somewhere in the core of the building as Eric rounded a corner onto the next floor. *God help me! Just four more sets of stairs and I'll be out!*

He moved as quickly as the crowd in front of him would allow, but even as he did he thought one more time of the firefighter and the little girl who obviously mattered so much to him. Almost at the same time another thought hit him. Why wasn't he worried about his own child, the boy he had never made time for? Josh had to know about this by now. And what about Laura? If the World Trade Center collapsed on top of him, he'd die without having told them the truth—that he *did* love them, even if he never showed it.

Never said it.

Sorrow filled his heart as he moved his feet one agonizingly slow step at a time. What had he done? He'd put success and position and money ahead of the people in his life. Laura, the woman he'd loved from the moment he first saw her. And Josh, the child who looked so much like her. The truth was, he didn't even know the boy.

When had he changed? Had it really been the loss of their tiny daughter? Was that when he began putting all his efforts into work and almost none of them into his life at home? He trudged down another seven steps to the next landing, and suddenly he knew. Of course that was when it had happened. He'd made a decision in the deepest place of his soul never again to depend on God or anyone else. God would let him down and people would die. The only thing he could count on was himself, and that was the way he'd lived every day since.

The air around him grew thicker, more oppressive, and the building was moving so much he could barely keep his balance. He thought about the last conversation he'd had with Laura. For the life of him he couldn't remember whether he'd even told her he loved her.

People all around him were screaming now, pushing more than before and desperate to clear the building. Eric took the stairs as quickly as he could, but still he felt like he was moving in a kind of painful slow motion. One step ... another ... another ...

The building was going to collapse on top of him, and he'd be buried alive ... everything he'd done to make a success of himself had been for nothing, because now he was about to die, and Laura and Josh would never know how he really felt, how sorry he was for all he'd denied them.

Another step ... another ...

The building groaned and lurched, and in that instant Eric had a thought, a notion that seemed to come almost on its own volition. As long as he drew breath he could still pray. A horrific roar sounded from somewhere far above him, but Eric only worked his way down the stairs. And as he did, he begged God for something he never would have asked

for prior to the disaster that morning.

A second chance.

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Jake and Larry and Maxwell jogged up the last thirty floors. They were gasping for breath as they pushed their way onto the sixty-first floor, the site where they'd been told to set up a staging area. There by the elevator bank were twelve other firefighters, each working over victims sprawled out on the floor. Several men—including one Jake had worked with before—were setting up IV bags and giving shots of morphine.

“What can we do?” Maxwell lurched ahead with Jake and Larry behind him.

“They told us the elevators were working.” One of the men looked up, his face weary. “We sent two men and five victims down eight minutes ago. So far nothing's come back.”

“You mean the car stopped?” Jake came up alongside a woman whose arms and torso were burned nearly to the bone. He felt her neck for a pulse, but it was weak and thready. She was a pretty woman, in her mid-twenties with a wedding ring. Somewhere, her husband was probably crazy with worry about her, the same way Jamie was no doubt feeling about him.

“Hey, buddy.” Larry came up beside him. “She's not going to make it.”

“I know.” Futility welled up inside Jake. The disaster that morning was clearly an MCI—the code firefighters used to define a mass casualty incident. Any MCI meant that resources and energy had to be saved for victims who still had a chance. If a person was mortally wounded, firefighters were supposed to move on to the next victim.

Jake stared at the dying woman, sucked in a quick breath, and held it. He had trained for this type of work, but a disaster like the one they were fighting was so much bigger than anything they could've prepared for. After hiking up sixty-one floors, Jake was exhausted, and now that they'd arrived, there was so little they could do.

Maxwell was still asking about the elevator.

“The building's shaking too much to keep an elevator car moving right,” one of the men answered. “My guess is we're waiting for nothing. We'll need to carry these people down.”

“What about the crash site?” Maxwell too had positioned himself near one of the victims and was pulling a morphine kit from his pack.

“Seventy-eight has a crew working it right now. They're talking to us on the radio. It's ... it's worse than anything they've ever seen.”

Jake stood and counted the victims. Eighteen, and just fifteen firefighters. “There're more men on the way up. Let's get the ones we can help onto our backs and start down again.”

“He's right.” Larry straightened and stood next to Jake. “By the time we get everyone loaded up, the others will be here.”

A cry came from the burned woman, the one on the floor near Jake. “Please ... help me.”

Jake was on his knees at her side instantly. The building shuddered and lurched, shaking so much that his words vibrated when he spoke. “I'm h-h—here ... we're getting help as fast as we can.”

The woman was quiet a moment, in and out of consciousness. She moaned again. “Pray. Someone ... pray with me ... please.”

Without looking for approval, Jake took hold of the woman's fingers—the only part of her arms not burned. “Come on, Larry, get down here with me.”

Larry dropped to the woman's other side and took hold of her knee. “Go ahead.”

Around them firefighters struggled to load victims on their backs, but as they did, the tower groaned and creaked even louder than before. Jake looked up, his eyes darting from the ceiling to the walls and back up again. He understood what the sound meant. The steel supports were melting, giving way more with each passing second.

A shattering sound pierced the room like a gunshot, and everyone

jumped. The noise was followed by another, and another. Jake shot a glance toward the noise. Windows were breaking, popping out from the force of the twisting structure.

Jake glanced around the room at the others. The reality of what was about to happen was clear to every one of the firefighters there. The tower was coming down. They were sixty-one floors off the ground and about to be buried beneath tons of cement, steel, and burning jet fuel.

“Larry ...” Jake locked eyes with his friend. They were still kneeling on the floor on either side of the burned young woman. “We’re not gonna make it, buddy. Not this time.”

“Nope.” Larry’s face was pale and he bit his lip. His voice was a choked whisper. “I love you, JB. You’ve been like a brother.”

“You too. I never thought ...” Jake’s voice cracked. “I’m ... I’m gonna miss my girls.”

“We can’t think like that. They’ll be with us soon enough, right?” Larry’s eyes welled up. “Until then I’ll still be watching your back.”

“Right.” Jake tried to sort through his feelings. Fear, anxiety, but most of all a deep sadness. Because he’d never know Jamie’s kiss again, never get lost in her eyes. And because he wasn’t going to give Sierra her horsey ride that night, after all. He dropped his head, nearly overcome. *What about Your promise, God? What about Jamie’s soul?* He let the thought pass. “If I could ... if I could have one more day with them.”

The building lurched. Jake looked at the other firefighters. They were wide-eyed, but still they went about their business, voices calm, loading patients on their backs, and operating on a sort of automatic pilot—the result of training that would have them working the rescue as long as they drew breath.

But none of them were here with their best friend, the way Jake was. Another loud creaking sounded above them.

“Hey.” Larry reached across the woman and gripped Jake’s shoulder. “I’ll meet you on the other side.” His hands shook. “Look for me, okay?”

“Okay.” Jake's heart raced, and he ordered himself not to run for his life. There was no point now, anyway. And if he was going to die, he wanted to do it here, huddled over a victim, right beside his best friend.

The woman between them on the floor moaned again. “Pray. P—p—pray ...”

*Prayer.*

Yes, that's exactly what they needed. The building was swaying harder now. They had seconds, a minute at best. Jake gripped Larry's arm so they were linked together, forming an arc over the burned woman. “God, this is our most desperate hour. We beg You to be kind and merciful, swift and sure. Bring us home safely where we can live with You forever.”

“Jake ...” Maxwell moved closer and hunched near the feet of the woman. He had an unconscious young man over his shoulders. “I ... I don't know much about Jesus.”

Jake opened his eyes and stared at his captain. The man was gruff and seasoned, a weathered veteran with the attitude of a street fighter and the mouth of an angry sailor. Jake had never considered inviting the man to church, never dreamed of talking to him about prayer, let alone Jesus.

But here the need was painfully obvious, and Maxwell wanted answers in a hurry.

“Jesus is the Son of God.” Jake's voice was strong, and it filled the area near the elevators. “He died for you. For me. He's alive now in heaven,” Jake caught Larry's gaze and held it, “making a place for everyone who believes in Him.”

Maxwell was nodding. “I want that. What do I need to do? Tell me quick ...”

“Pray with me.” Jake looked around the room. “Any of you who want Jesus now, pray with me.” He closed his eyes and ignored the sadness, ignored the images of Jamie and Sierra and the home they shared together. Instead, he concentrated on the prayer ... the last prayer he would pray this

side of heaven. “Lord, I’m sorry for the things I’ve done that have kept me from You.”

Around the room, hurried voices joined Maxwell’s as the prayer was repeated. Jake pushed on, his voice stronger with each word. “I believe You are the Son of God, and I want Your gift of salvation. I need a Savior.”

In unison, both the conscious victims and the firefighters repeated Jake’s words. Some were already Christians, men Jake had seen at church or prayer services over the years. But in these, their final moments, there were no other words any of them would rather be saying.

Jake was yelling now, wanting to be heard above the sounds coming from the building. “I believe You’re preparing a place for me ...” From not far above them, a roar began to build until it sounded like a thousand freight trains headed straight for them. Jake squeezed Larry’s arm and hoped that somehow the next life would offer him a window to the one here. That way he could at least see Jamie and Sierra, pray for them, and watch them live their lives. Even if he could never hold them again. The deafening noise was too loud to be heard over, but Jake continued anyway. “A place in heaven ... where we’ll be together even this very d—”

The ceiling collapsed on top of them, and Jake began to tumble, his arm still linked with Larry’s. A crushing feeling wrapped itself around Jake and sucked the air from him. He could still feel Larry, still sense his presence beside him as they fell, but the roar was suffocating now, and darkness smothered them.

Then slowly, gradually, the darkness gave way to light. The most brilliant, peaceful light Jake had ever seen. His last thought was not about sadness or terror or loss of any kind. Rather it was a prayer. That one day, Jamie would believe. Because he could already feel the place where he was headed, already see it somehow. It was a land so amazing, so full of love and goodness and beauty that Jamie would want to go tomorrow if only she knew.



Yes, she had to believe. God had assured him of that, hadn't He? And that final knowing was enough to help Jake let go, enough to help him give himself over to the light that lay ahead of him. Enough to believe that one day this long good-bye would be over and they'd be together again. Not just for a day or a year or a lifetime.

But forever.

## Elf

11 September 2001 09:22

Eric kan die gebou voel vibreer.

Dit het twintig minute gelede begin toe 'n ontploffing iewers bokant hom plaasgevind het, 'n slag wat Eric en almal buite in die gang se voete letterlik onder hulle uitgeslaan het. Sy telefoon was onmiddellik dood en Allen het hom dieselfde oomblik uitasem bereik. Hulle het saam na die oop area gehardloop waar 'n klomp mense deurmekaar gegil en geskree het. Die diepe onrus wat vroeër geheers het, het nou in volwaardige paniek verander.

“Ons is getref! Ons is ...”

“'n Vliegtuig ... nog 'n vliegtuig. 'n Vliegtuig is deur die ...”

“Hy het reguit hiernatoe gevlieg, toe kan ons hom nie meer sien nie ...”

Almal het gelyk gepraat en dit was onmoontlik om sin te maak uit wat gesê word. Oor een feit bestaan daar egter nie onsekerheid nie. Hierdie keer is hulle gebou deur 'n vliegtuig getref – en hulle moet vinnig hier uitkom.

“Die hysbakke werk nie!” het iemand gegil en 'n klomp mense het na die trapkuil gestroom. Daar is drie in die gebou wat almal na die ingangsportaal lei. Eric het dit oorweeg om by die groep aan te sluit. Sy selfoon se battery is pap en Laura sou vir sy oproep wag. Teen daardie tyd waarskynlik al histeries. Sy sou oor die nuus sien dat 'n tweede vliegtuig in die suidelike toring vasgevlieg het, en sy sou aanneem dat hy hom in die middel van die verwoesting bevind.

Hy is net na die trappe toe op pad toe iemand hom egter aan die mou gryp. Eric swaai om en kom sentimeters van Allen af tot stilstand. Die man se wenkbroue het amper tot oor sy ooglede gesak. “Waarnatoe is jy op pad?”

Eric kyk na die trappe en terug na Allen. “Ons moet hier uitkom.”

“Daar is geen haas nie, Eric. Die trappe gaan gepak wees.” Allen kyk vinnig terug na Koppel & Grant se kantoor. “Ek het drie buitelandse transaksies wat nou afgehandel moet word. Voor die oggend verby is.”

Eric staar na Allen. Die man is mal. “Voel jy dit nie?” Die woorde stort oor sy lippe en dis met die grootste inspanning dat hy nie losruk en na die trappe vlug nie – vir sy lewe. “Die plek vibreer, Allen. Ons moet hier uit.”

“Kyk.” Allen se oë is hard. “Hierdie vervloekte terroriste het genoeg skade aangerig – ek gaan nie toelaat dat hulle boonop ’n paar transaksies van honderde duisende ruïneer nie.”

Eric se hart klop onstuimig. Hy kyk van Allen na die mense by die trap en weer na sy baas. Dit sal vyf, selfs tien minute duur voordat al die mense in die trapkuil is. Dalk is Allen reg. “Nou goed.” Hy begin na die kantoor toe loop en Allen val langs hom in. “Maar ons moet spring.”

Hulle haas hulle deur die oopplankantoor na Allen se kantoor toe. Allen skuif agter die rekenaar in terwyl Eric uit ’n hand vol lêers voorlees. Tien minute later steek Hank Walden, een van hulle finansiële bestuurders, sy kop by die deur in. “Ons het opdrag om te ontruim.” Die man se oë is groot en hy haal gejaagd asem. “Almal moet uit.”

Eric is op die punt om iets te sê toe Allen sy hand ophou. “Die rook het nog nie eens tot hier gekom nie.” Hy hou sy oë op die skerm. “Ons sal oor dertig, maksimum veertig minute klaar wees. Ons gaan duisende verloor as ek nie nou hier klaarmaak nie.”

“Meneer ... ” Walden kyk desperaat na Eric. “Ons het nie ’n keuse nie, Meneer. Die gebou is nie veilig nie.”

Allen wuif afwysend sonder om op te kyk. “Dis die World Trade Center. Dit gaan niks oorkom nie.” Hy kyk haastig na Walden. “Jy kan maar loop. Ons kom nou.”

Met ’n laaste verskrikte kyk na Eric verdwyn Walden en sy voetstappe raak weg in die gang.

Eric staar na Allen. “Kan dit nie wag nie, Allen? Niemand anders in New York is nou besig om te werk nie.”

Allen wys net na die lêers in Eric se hande en hou aan tik. Nog tien minute gaan verby en Eric raak bewus van ’n verandering, iets aan die manier waarop die gebou vibreer. Dalk is dit sy verbeelding, maar dis asof die trillings nou erger, meer waarneembaar is. Eric kyk deur die venster na die chaos wat amper tweehonderd meter onder hulle heers. Geboue soos dié word mos op rollers gebou? Dit kan die beweging verklaar – veral met die vlammesee bokant hulle. Maar sê nou dis nie die rede vir die vibrasie nie? Vier-en-sestig verdiepings is bitter ver van die grond af.

Eric ril.

“Meneer ... ” Hy sit die lêers op die lessenaar neer en staan op. “Ek loop nou. Ek het ’n gesin waaraan ek moet dink.”

Allen hou op tik en frons teleurgesteld op na hom. “Ek het gedink ek kan op jou reken.”

Eric haat die manier waarop sy baas se opmerking hom laat voel. Hy skud sy kop. “Jy kan op my reken, Allen, maar ek dink ons al twee moet hier uit. Iets aan die gebou voel nie reg nie.”

Hierdie keer sit Allen agteroor, vou sy arms en kyk na Eric. “Jy’s nie die man wat ek gedink het jy is nie, Eric.” Hy mompel iets en kyk weer na die skerm. Dan maak hy ’n afwysende gebaar sonder om weer met Eric oogkontak te

maak. “Loop tog net ... Ek sal self hier klaarmaak.”

Eric mors nie tyd deur Allen te antwoord nie. Hy maak hom uit die voete en hardloop deur die doolhof tafels en afskortings in die oopplankantoor. By een van die lessenaars is ’n man in sy twintigerjare koorsagtig besig om te tik.

“Wat doen jy? Die gebou word ontruim.”

“Niemand het gesê ons moet ontruim nie.” Die man se vingers vlieg onverpoosd oor die sleutelbord. “Hierdie dokument moet vandag in.”

“Luister, vriend.” Eric praat in ’n gebiedende stem. “Hulle het beveel ons moet ontruim. Die brand is op pad hierheen.” Eric soek na die plek teen die muur waar die rekenaar ingeprop is. Die kragprop is egter agter die man se lessenaar. Eric wend hom na die man en gil vir hom. “Moenie net daar sit nie!”

Die man hou op tik en gee Eric ’n verpletterende kyk. “Dis my lewe. Los my uit. Ek kry ’n bonus as ek hierdie opdrag vandag klaarmaak.” Hy pers sy lippe opmekaar. “Ek gaan nie toelaat dat twintig vloere my keer nie.”

Eric maak ’n ergerlike geluid, swaai om en haas hom verder na die trappe. Nou goed. As die man wil bly, is daar niks wat hy kan doen nie. Hy is ’n minuut later by die trapkuil en pluk die deur oop. Die plek is leeg en hy begin die trappies afdraf. Op die drie-en-vyftigste vloer begin hy brandweermanne van onder af teëkom.

“Nog iemand daarbo?” wil een brandweerman by hom weet.

“My baas ... hy het ’n paar transaksies wat hy wil afhandel.” Eric hyg en probeer sy asem terugkry. “En ’n mal ou met ’n sperdatum. Hulle weier om te ontruim.”

Die brandweermanne knik en klim verder. Elkeen van die hygende mans dra omtrent twintig kilogram se toerusting en dit lyk nie asof hulle van plan is om te rus voordat hulle die brand bereik het nie. Eric hervat sy aftog en op die drie-en-veertigste vloer haal hy die mense in. Dis toe dat hy dit opmerk.

Die vibrasies is besig om erger te word; dis nie sy verbeelding nie.

Hy kan vensters buitekant die trapkuil hoor ratel en dit voel asof die gebou bokant hom effens wieg. Eric wens die groep kon vinniger vorder. Vir wat beweeg die gebou so? Is dit helikopters wat besig is om water oor die vuur uit te gooi? Of is die vuur erg genoeg om honderd verdiepings van sement en staal te laat beweeg? Hoe dit ook al sy, Eric wil nie daaraan dink nie. Daar is niks wat hy kan doen nie, niks wat enigiemand van hulle kan doen, buiten om so vinnig moontlik te probeer uitkom.

Een trappie op ’n slag.

Die mense wat saam met hom afbeweeg, is ordelik en kalm. Waarskynlik van skok, besluit Eric. Hy ken nie een van hulle nie, en die mense van Koppel & Grant is nou al seker twintig vloere onder hom. Eric probeer sy asem diep intrek, maar kan nie. Die lug in die trapkuil is warm en bedompig en muf, en daar heers ’n kwalik beheerste paniek. Elke keer wanneer hulle ’n trapportaal bereik, kyk hy na die syfer op die deur.

Een-en-dertig ... dertig ... nege-en-twintig ... agt-en-twintig ... sewe-en-twintig

...  
Nog ses vloere en toe gebeur dit. Eric struikel oor 'n verlore aktetas in die trapkuil en val. 'n Skerp pyn skiet deur sy enkel en hy kry nie opgestaan nie. Die volgende oomblik word 'n hand na hom toe uitgesteek. Eric gryp die persoon se hand en toe hy sukkelend regop kom, val 'n brandweerman se helm teen sy bors.

Die brandweerman help Eric in 'n sittende posisie, uit die pad van die mense wat verbybeweeg. Die man se helm het langs Eric te lande gekom, en hy tel dit op. Maar net toe hy dit vir die brandweerman wil teruggee, word sy aandag deur iets getrek, iets aan die binnekant van die helm. Eric kyk daarna en sy hart mis 'n slag.

Dis 'n foto van 'n klein dogtertjie, seker so vier of vyf jaar oud. En onderkant die foto is die naam "Sierra" in 'n kinderlike handskrif geskryf. Dit is stewig aan die binnekant van die helm vasgeplak. Daar is 'n knop in Eric se keel toe hy dit na die man uithou. En dis toe, met die mense wat steeds in gelid verbybeweeg, dat Eric in die brandweerman se gesig kyk en voel hoe sy asem in sy keel vassteek.

Die brandweerman kyk geskok na hom. En noudat Eric die man mooi kan sien, is die rede so duidelik soos daglig. Hulle kon 'n tweeling gewees het. 'n Identiese tweeling, trouens. Eric knip sy oë. Is hy besig om spoke te sien? Hy het al van vreemdelinge gehoor wat buitengewoon na mekaar lyk. Maar hy het nog nooit iemand gesien wat so baie, so te sê presies soos hy lyk nie. Nog nooit nie. Die kort donker hare, hoekige kakebeen, hoë wangbene, blou oë. Hulle het selfs dieselfde bou.

Dis soos om in 'n spieël te kyk.

Eric se mond hang oop en hy kan nie wegkyk nie. Tot dusver het die hele insident vyf sekondes lank geduur – meer as wat hy of die man kan bekostig. Eric staan op, nie in staat om sy oë van die man weg te skeur nie. "Dankie." Hy oorhandig die helm aan die man.

"Dis ... dis my dogtertjie." Die brandweerman neem sy helm by Eric en druk dit stewig op sy kop. "Ons moet gou maak."

"Dankie ... " Eric wil meer sê. Hy wil vir die man dankie sê dat hy hom opgehelp het, dat hy sy lewe vir hulle waag, dat hy doen wat hy doen, selfs al kan dit hom moontlik alles kos.

Insluitend die geleentheid om sy klein Sierra weer te sien.

Maar die oomblik is verby en die brandweerman knik 'n laaste keer toe hy weer begin klim. Eric val weer by die stadig bewegende stroom mense in. Sy enkel is seer, maar daar is niks wat hy nou daaraan kan doen nie. Hulle moet uit die onstabiele gebou kom.

Vyftien ... veertien ... dertien ...

Eric bly beweeg, maar sy gedagtes is nog by die twee-en-twintigste vloer, by die brandweerman en die vreemde ooreenkoms tussen hulle. Iets aan die man se uitdrukking en die foto van die klein dogtertjie, Sierra, is in Eric se gedagtes aangeëts. Dit bly by hom, spook by hom, en hy is seker dat hy vir die

res van sy lewe die kind se gesiggie sal onthou, die manier waarop sy vanuit die brandweerman se helm vir hom geglimlag het.

Hulle bereik vloer twaalf ... elf ... tien ...

Wat het hy in die brandweerman se oë gesien? 'n Rou vasberadenheid, 'n intense fokus om die slagoffers op die onveilige boonste vloere te bereik? Ja, dis wat dit was. En meer nog, 'n vrede. 'n Vrede waarvan Eric niks weet nie.

Nege ... agt ... sewe ...

Eric se linkerenkel is dood, en uitputting en vrees maak dat sy hart vinnig klop. Maar dit maak nie saak nie. Al waaraan hy kan dink, is Sierra en haar brandweerman-pa. Vir 'n oomblik oorweeg hy dit om vir die man te bid. Maar aan die ander kant, wat sal dit help? Die brandweerman is op pad boontoe, reguit na die vlammesee. En die gebou is nou meer onstabiel as voorheen.

*Hy sal dit nie maak nie, nè, Here? Hy sal doodgaan, en Sierra gaan haar pa nooit weer sien nie. Vir wat? Teen hierdie tyd is die mense daarbo seker in elk geval al dood. Rook en hitte en dampe. Ek kan my nie indink dat enigiemand die nagmerrie bokant die ongelukstoneel sal oorleef nie.*

Eric gaan staan vir 'n oomblik. Dalk moet hy boontoe hardloop en die man gaan soek, hom gryp en daarop aandring dat hy saam met die ander verstandige mense uit die gebou kom. Sodoende kan hulle oor die ooreenkoms tussen hulle praat en dit probeer uitpluis. Is hulle dalk op 'n manier familie? Is die man dalk 'n verlangse nefie wat met identiese gelaatstrekke gebore is? Indien die brandweerman nog steeds op pad boontoe is, is Eric amper seker dat hy nooit sal weet nie, dat hy die man nooit weer sal sien nie.

Maar daar is te veel mense in die trapkuil en hy het geen ander keuse as om saam met hulle te bly beweeg nie. Nog net ses vloere, vyf ... Die skudding word nou erger en die trapkuil buig asof van rubber gemaak.

“Ons moet hier uit!” gil 'n man drie vloere bo hom. “Die hele gebou is besig om ineen te stort.”

*Die hele gebou?* Selfs te midde van die skuddings het Eric nooit gedink dat so iets moontlik is nie. Kan die World Trade Center regtig ineenstort? 'n Onheilspellende kreun kom van iewers uit die kern van die gebou toe Eric die volgende vloer bereik. *Here, help my! Nog net vier stelle trappe, dan's ek uit!*

Hy beweeg so vinnig soos die mense voor hom dit toelaat, maar te midde van die paniek koers sy gedagtes weer terug na die brandweerman en die klein dogtertjie wat vir hom so kosbaar is. Toe word hy deur 'n ander gedagte getref. Wat van sy eie kind, die seuntjie vir wie hy nooit tyd het nie? Teen hierdie tyd moet Josh hiervan weet. En wat van Laura? As die World Trade Center bo-op hom ineenstort, sal hy doodgaan sonder dat hy met hulle kon praat, vir hulle kon sê dat hy hulle liefhet, selfs al wys hy dit nooit nie.

Al sê hy dit nooit nie.

'n Groot hartseer klop in sy hart terwyl hy een folterende, stadige tree op 'n slag vorder. Wat het hy gedoen? Hy het sukses en status en geld bo die mense in sy lewe gestel. Laura, die vrou wat hy van die eerste oomblik af liefgehad

het. En Josh, die kind wat so baie na haar trek. Die feit is, hy ken die seuntjie nie eens nie.

Wanneer het hy verander? Was dit regtig die verlies van hulle babadogtertjie? Was dit toe hy begin het om al sy energie in sy werk te stort sodat hy niks vir sy gesin oorgehad het nie? Hy vorder met swaar treë tot op die volgende vloer, en skielik weet hy. Ja, dit was toe dit gebeur het. Hy het op 'n dag diep in sy binneste 'n besluit geneem om nooit weer op God of enigiemand anders staat te maak nie. God sou hom teleurstel en mense gaan dood. Die enigste een op wie hy kon staatmaak, was homself, en sedertdien het hy sy lewe daarvolgens ingerig.

Rondom hom is dit nou erg benoud en die gebou wieg nou só dat hy skaars op sy voete kan bly. Hy dink aan sy laaste gesprek met Laura. Hy kan om die dood toe nie onthou wanneer laas hy vir haar gesê het hy het haar lief nie.

Die mense rondom hom skree en beur paniekerig teen die voorstes, desperaat om uit die gebou te kom. Eric beweeg so vinnig hy kan, maar dit voel steeds asof hy in 'n soort pynlik stadige aksie vasgevang is. Tree ... vir tree ... vir tree

...

Die gebou gaan op hom ineens stort en hy gaan lewend begrawe word ... Alles wat hy gedoen het om 'n sukses van homself te maak, was tevergeefs, want hy gaan binne minute sterf sonder dat Laura en Josh ooit gaan weet hoe hy werklik voel, hoe jammer hy oor alles is waarvan hy hulle ontnem het.

Nog 'n trappie ... nog een ...

Die gebou kreun en steier en op daardie oomblik skiet 'n gedagte Eric te binne, 'n idee wat amper asof uit eie beweging na hom toe kom. Solank hy asemhaal, kan hy nog bid. 'n Skrikwekkende gedruis klink iewers ver bo hom, maar Eric bly beweeg. En terwyl hy pynlik stadig vorder, smee hy God vir iets waarvoor hy Hom nooit voor vanoggend se ramp sou vra nie.

'n Tweede kans.

Jake en Larry en Maxwell draf die laaste dertig vloere tot bo. Hulle hyg na asem toe hulle die een-en-sestigste vloer bereik waar hulle 'n basis moet opstel. Twaalf ander brandweermanne werk reeds gebukkend oor die slagoffers wat verspreid oor die vloer lê. 'n Paar mans – insluitend een saam met wie Jake al voorheen gewerk het – is besig om aarvoeding en morfeninspuitings toe te dien.

“Wat kan ons doen?” Maxwell hardloop nader met Jake en Larry op sy hakke. “Hulle het vir ons gesê die hysbakke werk.” Een van die mans kyk op, sy oë moeg en verslae. “Ons het twee van ons manne en vyf slagoffers agt minute gelede afgestuur. Die hysbak het nog nie weer teruggekom nie.”

“Jy bedoel hy het vasgehaak?” Jake gaan hurk by 'n vrou wie se arms en bolyf amper tot op die been verbrand is. Hy voel teen haar nek, maar haar pols is swak en onegalig. Sy is 'n mooi vrou, iewers in haar twintigerjare met 'n trouwing. Iewers is haar man waarskynlik waansinnig van kommer oor haar, nes Jamie ongetwyfeld oor hom.

“JB ...” praat Larry langs hom. “Sy gaan dit nie maak nie.”

“Ek weet.” ’n Gevoel van vergeefsheid wel in hom op. Vanoggend se ramp is duidelik ’n MCI – die kode wat brandweermanne vir ’n massiewe noodlottige insident gebruik. Enige MCI beteken dat die manne hulle hulpmiddels en energie vir slagoffers moet spaar wat steeds ’n kans op oorlewing het. As iemand noodlottig gewond is, is brandweermanne veronderstel om die volgende slagoffer te help.

Jake staar na die sterwende vrou, trek sy asem vinnig in, en hou dit op. Hy is vir hierdie soort werk opgelei, maar die ramp wat vandag hier afspeel, is soveel erger as enigiets waarop hulle hulle kon voorberei. Na ’n klim van een-en-sestig verdiepings is Jake gedaan, en noudat hulle hier is, is daar so min wat hulle kan doen.

Maxwell is steeds besig om die hysbaksituasie te bespreek.

“’n Hysbak sal nie werk in ’n gebou wat so beweeg nie,” antwoord een van die mans. “Ek dink ons wag verniet. Ons sal die mense moet dra.”

“Wat van die ongelukstoneel?” Maxwell het ook by een van die slagoffers gaan hurk en is besig om ’n morfieninspuiting voor te berei.

“Daar is op die oomblik ’n span op agt-en-sewentig. Ons is met radio in verbinding. Hulle ... hulle het nog nooit so iets gesien nie.”

Jake staan op en tel die slagoffers. Agtien, en daar is net vyftien brandweermanne. “Daar is nog ’n paar ouens op pad boontoe. Kom ons kry dié wat ons kan help, solank op ons rûe en vat hulle ondertoe.”

“Hy’s reg.” Larry kom langs Jake orent. “Teen die tyd dat ons hier klaar is, sal die ander hier wees.”

’n Gekerm kom van die vrou op die vloer naby Jake. “Asse-blief ... help my.”

Jake is onmiddellik op sy knieë langs haar. Die sidderende gebou gee ’n ruk, en die trillings is so erg dat sy woorde vibreer toe hy praat. “Ek’s h-h-hier ... Nog hulp is op pad.”

Die vrou is ’n oomblik lank stil, raak weg en kom weer by. Sy kreun weer. “Bid. Iemand ... bid vir my ... as-seblief.”

Sonder om vir goedkeuring te wag, neem Jake die vrou se vingers – die enigste deel van haar arms wat nie gebrand is nie. “Kom bid saam, Larry.”

Larry sak aan die vrou se ander kant neer en plaas sy hand op haar knie.

Rondom hulle sukkel brandweermanne om slagoffers op hulle rûe te laai, maar intussen het die gekreun en gekners van die gebou nog harder geword. Jake kyk op, van die plafon na die mure en dan weer op. Hy weet wat die geluide beteken. Die smeltende staalstawe is besig om elke oomblik verder mee te gee.

’n Versplintering weerklink soos ’n geweskoot deur die vertrek, en almal wip. Kort daarna is daar nog een, en nog een. Jake kyk na waar dit vandaan kom. Dis vensters wat bars en deur die krag van die wringende struktuur aan stukke gespat word.

Jake se oë flits deur die vertrek na die ander. Die realiteit van dit wat nou gaan gebeur, staan in sy makkers se oë geskryf. Die toring is op sy laaste. Hulle is een-en-sestig vloere bo die grond en gaan onder tonne sement, staal en

brandende vliegtuigbrandstof begrawe word.

“Larry ... ” Jake se oë ontmoet dié van sy vriend. Hulle kniel nog aan weerskante van die verbrande jong vrou. “Ons gaan dit nie maak nie, my vriend. Nie hierdie keer nie.”

“Nee,” Larry se gesig is bleek en hy byt op sy lippe. Sy stem is ’n gesmoorde fluistering. “Ek is lief vir jou, JB. Jy was nog altyd soos ’n broer.”

“Jy ook. Ek’t nooit gedink ... ” Jake se stem breek. “Ek ... ek gaan my meisies mis.”

“Ons mag nie so dink nie. Hulle gaan oor ’n rukkie by ons wees.” Larry se oë skiet vol trane. “Intussen is ek steeds hier vir jou.”

“En ek vir jou.” Jake probeer sy gevoelens peil. Vrees, angs, maar bowenal ’n groot hartseer. Want hy sal Jamie nooit weer soen nie, homself nooit weer in haar oë verloor nie. En hy gaan Sierra nie vanaand laat perdjieri nie. Hy laat sy kop sak, amper oorstelp. *Wat van u belofte, Here? Wat van Jamie se siel?* Die gedagte hang in sy hart. “As ek ... as ek nog net een dag saam met hulle kon hê.”

Die gebou ruk. Jake kyk na die ander brandweermanne. Hulle oë is oopgesper, maar hulle is onverpoosd besig om slagoffers op hulle rûe te laai. Hulle funksioneer meganies – die resultaat van opleiding wat hulle tot en met hulle laaste asemteug gefokus sal hou.

Maar niemand van hulle het ’n beste vriend langs hom soos Jake nie. Bokant hulle weerklink daar nog ’n oorverdowende slag.

“Hei.” Larry leun bo-oor die vrou en plant sy hand op Jake se skouer. “Ons sien mekaar weer as ons by die Here is.” Sy hande bewe. “Kry my daar, oukei?”

“Oukei.” Jake se hartklop weergalm in sy ore, en dis met inspanning dat hy nie vir sy lewe vlug nie. Dit sal in elk geval nie help nie. En as hy moet doodgaan, wil hy dit hier doen, langs sy beste vriend by ’n slagoffer.

Tussen hulle kreun die vrou nog ’n keer. “Bid. B-b-bid ... ”

Gebed is presies wat hulle nou nodig het. Die gebou wieg gevaarlik. Hulle het sekondes, ’n minuut op die meeste. Jake se hand sluit om Larry se arm bo-oor die vrou. “Here, ons is desperaat. Ons smeeek U vir u goedheid en genade, dat die dood vinnig en finaal sal wees. Bring ons veilig huis toe sodat ons vir altyd by U kan wees.”

“Jake ... ” Maxwell kom nader en hurk by die vrou se voete. Daar is ’n bewustelose jong man oor sy skouer. “Ek ... ek weet nie veel van Jesus nie.”

Jake maak sy oë oop en staar na sy kaptein. Die man is ’n ervare, deurleefde veteraan met die houding van ’n uitsmyter en die mond van ’n matroos. Jake het dit nog nooit oorweeg om die man saam kerk toe te nooi nie, nooit daarvan gedroom om met hom oor gebed, laat staan nog oor Jesus, te praat nie.

Maar sy nood staan in sy oë geskryf, en Maxwell is haastig vir antwoorde.

“Jesus is die Seun van God.” Jake praat in ’n sterk stem, en dit dra deur die area voor die hysbakke. “Hy het vir jou gesterf. Vir my. Hy lewe vandag,”



Jake vang Larry se oog, “en is in die hemel besig om plek te maak vir almal wat in Hom glo.”

Maxwell knik. “Hoe maak mens? Wat moet ek doen? Sê gou ... ”

“Bid saam met my.” Jake kyk om hom rond. “Enigee van julle wat Jesus wil aanneem, bid nou saam met my.” Hy maak sy oë toe en ignoreer die hartseer, ignoreer die beelde van Jamie en Sierra en die huis waar hulle bly. Hy konsentreer op die gebed ... die laaste wat hy in hierdie wêreld gaan bid. “Here, ek’s jammer oor alles wat ek gedoen het wat my van U weggehou het.” Daar is ander stemme wat gejaagd by Maxwell s’n inval. Jake vervolg, en dis asof sy stem met elke woord sterker word.

“Ek glo dat U die Seun van God is, en ek wil u verlossing ontvang. Ek het ’n Redder nodig.”

Die slagoffers wat by hulle bewussyn is en die brandweermanne herhaal Jake se woorde in ’n koor. Sommige is reeds Christene, mans wat Jake deur die jare by die kerk of bidure gesien het. Maar in hierdie laaste oomblikke is daar geen ander woorde wat hulle eerder sou wou sê nie.

Jake moet nou gil om bo die wanklanke in die gebou gehoor te word. “Ek glo U is besig om vir my ’n plek voor te berei ... ” Enkele verdiepings bo hulle begin ’n dreuning opbou totdat dit soos honderde treine klink wat dawerend op hulle afkom. Jake druk Larry se arm en hoop dat die Here in die volgende lewe vir hom ’n venster op hierdie een sal gee. Sodat hy Jamie en Sierra ten minste sal kan sien, vir hulle kan bid en kyk hoe hulle lewens verloop. Selfs al kan hy hulle nooit weer vashou nie. Die geraas is oorverdowend, maar Jake bid verder. “’n Plek in die hemel ... waar ons mekaar vandag nog sal ... ”

Die plafon gee druisend bokant hulle mee en Jake begin val, sy arm steeds by Larry s’n ingehaak. ’n Knellende gevoel sluit om sy bors en dis asof sy asem uit hom gesuig word. Hy is steeds van Larry langs hom bewus terwyl hulle val, maar die geraas is nou verstikkend en dan word dit pikswart rondom hom. Stadigaan begin die donker geleidelik plek maak vir lig. Dis die helderste, mooiste lig wat Jake al ooit gesien het. Sy laaste gedagte is nie een van hartseer of verskrikking of enige soort verlies nie. Dis ’n gebed. Dat Jamie eendag sal glo. Want hy ervaar reeds iets van die plek waarheen hy op pad is; hy kan dit reeds begin sien. Die ongelooflike landskap voor hom is so vol liefde en goedheid en skoonheid dat Jamie môre sou wou kom as sy daarvan geweet het.

Skielik weet hy dat sy sal glo. Het God hom nie sy versekering gegee nie? En hierdie finale wete is genoeg om te maak dat Jake homself oorgee en hom in die lig verloor. Genoen om hom te laat glo dat hierdie lang skeiding eendag verby sal wees en hulle weer herenig sal word. Nie net vir ’n dag of ’n jaar nie.

Maar vir altyd.

# Chapter TWELVE

SEPTEMBER 11, 2001, 9:56 A.M.

Jamie had no idea that the country was under attack.

She had taken the nine o'clock step-aerobics class at the Staten Island Fitness Center, and at one minute after ten, she flung a towel around her neck, headed into the hallway and down the stairs toward the lobby. This was all part of Jamie's routine. Work out from nine to ten, head through the lobby to the locker room, take a shower, and pick up Sierra. Then the two of them would go to the park and spend an hour playing before going home for lunch.

But that morning, the moment she stepped foot in the lobby she stopped short. People filled the place, all of them gathered around a single television set anchored to one of the walls adjacent to the snack stand. Jamie couldn't see the picture from where she stood.

A woman with a pair of tennis shoes in her hands broke away from the cluster of people and headed toward the showers. Her eyes were damp.

"Excuse me ..." Jamie stepped in front of her. A terrible fear filled her throat, and she could barely voice her question. She searched the woman's face. "What's happening?"

The woman stared at her, disbelief etched in the lines on her forehead. "Don't you know?"

"Know what?"

"Terrorists attacked us. It happened an hour ago. The World Trade Center buildings are on fire. The Pentagon too."

Jamie's head began to spin. Why hadn't anyone stopped the aerobics class? And if the World Trade Center was on fire, then Jake—Jamie forced herself to think straight. "Terrorists? Was it a bomb?"

"No." The woman looked almost afraid to give Jamie the details. "They hijacked three planes. Flew two of them into the World Trade

Center, one of them into the Pentagon.” The woman pointed at the television. “It’s all happening live right now.” She shook her head. “I have to get home. My husband works on the fifteenth floor of the north tower, and I haven’t talked to him since ...”

Jamie was no longer listening. She sprinted across the lobby and found a place near the back of the crowd of exercisers. There it was in all its horrifying reality. Both of the Twin Towers were on fire, the top thirds of each building were engulfed in fire and smoke.

Airplanes had done this? Terrorists had flown them into the buildings on purpose? They’d taken control of the planes and crashed into the buildings? She gripped her waist and felt the room spin. She wanted to sit down before she fainted, but she couldn’t make herself move. Her eyes were fixed on the towers, scrutinizing the buildings, as though she might be able to see Jake through one of the tiny windows.

He was there somewhere. She knew it as certainly as she knew his name. Jake’s station was practically in the shadow of the World Trade Center. They’d be at the scene for sure. Jake and Larry and all the guys from Engine 57 and Ladder 96. Jamie’s chest hurt, and she couldn’t draw a deep breath.

The fire was too big, too massive, for them to fight. No number of firefighters could tackle a blaze like that. Jamie clenched her fists and ignored the way her fingernails dug into the palms of her hand. *Get out of there, Jake. Come on, honey, walk away. Help the people on the ground ...*

A dark-haired journalist came on the television screen, grim-faced and shaken. “We have reports now that fire is tearing through the Pentagon after a third passenger plane, American Airlines Flight 77, crashed into the building sixteen minutes ago. President Bush is declaring the disasters in New York and Washington, D.C. a terrorist attack.” The news program cut to live footage of the burning World Trade Center, and the reporter’s voice carried on over the images. “To recap here a bit, the airspace over the United States has been closed for the first time in history. Two passenger

planes crashed into the World Trade Center at 8:45 and 9:02 Eastern time this morning. Early estimates suggest that hundreds of people may be dead, though that number could be much higher. The Twin Towers hold office space for more than—”

The reporter stopped midsentence.

Suddenly, massive smoke billowed from the flaming section of the south tower. Jamie's mouth dropped open as the roof of the building disappeared and the entire hundred-story structure pancaked into a volcanic cloud of dust and debris.

For a moment no one spoke, no one moved. There were a few quiet gasps from the crowd of people around Jamie, but nothing else. None of them could believe what they'd just witnessed. Finally, in words trembling with disbelief, the reporter voiced what the rest of them didn't dare. “It ... it appears that the south tower of the World Trade Center has collapsed. I repeat ... the south tower of the World Trade Center has collapsed. This could mean casualties in the thousands ... the building was full of business workers and countless firefighters, all working desperately to ...”

Jamie put her hands over her ears and turned first one direction, then the other. It wasn't possible. There had to be a mistake, a trick somehow. The World Trade Center wouldn't fall; it was too strong, built too well. Still, the images were horrifyingly real. She couldn't stand to see another moment of it, didn't want to hear anyone say anything else about casualties and collapses.

Jake was fine; he had to be.

She took short, frantic steps and made a full circle this time. Where was the locker room? Why was nothing in its place anymore? And how come everyone was standing there watching the television? It was all a lie, a hoax. The World Trade Center wasn't on fire; it was impossible. Now, if only she could get home and talk to Jake.

The TV shouted at her from every corner of the room. Pressing her fists tight against her ears this time, she finally spotted the locker room and

made a run for it. Moving as fast as she could, she grabbed her things with both hands and raced to the kids' club. A small television was replaying the collapse of the tower in the corner of the room. Jamie looked at the workers and saw the shadows in their eyes. They knew what was happening.

*It's a lie*, she wanted to shout. *Everything's fine!*

Instead, Sierra came running up, her blue eyes shining and innocent, completely unaware. "Mommy!" She clung to Jamie's legs and then reached her hands up. "Hold me!"

"Hi, baby." Jamie tried to smile, but the corners of her mouth felt frozen. "Let's go home, okay?"

"What about the park?"

The three day-care workers were avoiding her, looking the other way and sharing quiet whispers between themselves. One of them was crying. Jamie understood instantly. The health club girls knew that Jamie was married to a firefighter; in fact, they knew Jake. He'd been in with her several times over the summer.

Jamie stared at them. "Everything's fine." She stuffed her towel into her bag, swung it onto her right shoulder, and scooped Sierra up onto her opposite hip. "You don't have to worry. Jake wasn't in the building."

Silence hovered between them for several seconds. Finally, one of the workers managed a sad, nervous smile. "That's good." She crossed her arms. "I'm afraid a lot of them were."

"Yeah, well, not Jake." She wanted to tell them the south tower hadn't really come down, but she wasn't up to the conversation. Without saying another word, she spun around and dashed outside to her minivan. She was right, wasn't she? If Jake was fighting the fire, he'd be in the north tower, the one first hit. His station would have been one of the first ones called, right?

She buckled Sierra into her car seat and ran her fingers through her sweaty bangs. What was she doing? The parking lot was full of cars, but not a single person. Everyone was inside watching TV. Then she

remembered. She was going home to call Jake. That way she would know for sure that he was okay.

“What's wrong, Mommy?”

Jamie climbed into the front seat, started the engine, and shifted it into reverse. At the same moment, she remembered she'd left her gym bag on the ground outside the van. “Just a minute, honey.” Jamie jumped back out, but as she did, the van moved backwards, tripping her and nearly knocking her beneath the front wheel.

The van was backing up without her!

She grabbed the top of her seat and pulled herself back inside. Inches before her car would've hit the one behind it, she slammed on the brakes.

In the backseat, Sierra began to cry. “Mommy ... what's happening? I was driving away by myself.”

Jamie gripped the steering wheel with both hands and gasped for breath. “It's okay. Mommy's ... sorry, sweetie. Nothing's going to happen to you.” Her heart raced, the sound of it echoing throughout her chest and neck, and a fresh layer of perspiration trickled down the sides of her face. With deliberate motions she put the van in park, stepped back out of the van, grabbed the gym bag, and threw it into the seat beside her.

The club was only five minutes from home, and when she was halfway there, she looked at Sierra in the rearview mirror. “Mommy's not feeling very good today. Let's see if Billy across the street wants to play, okay?”

“Okay.” Sierra's voice still held concern. “Is your tummy sick?”

“Yes.” Jamie tightened her grip on the steering wheel. It wasn't a lie. “I think if I have a little nap I'll feel better.”

They pulled into the driveway and hurried into the house. Sierra hovered near Jamie's leg while she dialed the neighbor. The woman was a stay-at-home mother of three, and she'd offered to baby-sit Sierra anytime. Jamie told the woman that yes, she'd seen the news, and no, she hadn't heard from Jake.

"I need a few hours ..." Jamie's voice trembled. "To make sure he's okay."

"Oh, Jamie, yes." The neighbor understood immediately. "Bring her right over."

Two minutes later Jamie was back at home. The last thing she wanted was to watch the horrific scenes on television. But the TV was her only source of information, the only place where she might get the details about firefighters and how many were hurt. She was on her way across the house to turn it on when she saw the message light blinking.

Jake must've called! He was fine, somewhere away from the World Trade Center helping from a distance. She darted up to the machine. A red number three was blinking on the front of it. Three messages. Jamie held her breath and pushed the play button.

They were all from Jake's cell phone number. The first two were brief messages saying he would try her again in a few minutes. She gripped the back of the desk chair as the third message began to play.

"Hi ... it's me again." Jake's tone was upbeat. "Looks like we'll get the call here pretty soon, honey. Everything's going to be okay, Jamie. I love you and I'll be home tonight, I promise. God's with me. Oh yeah, and my angel. Can't forget about him." His voice hesitated, and when the message started up again, his words were thicker than before. "So, I'll see you later, all right? And, sweetheart, tell Sierra I love her."

Jamie stared at the machine, and the room around her began to spin.

She pushed the button and played the message again, searching his words for a hint of worry, some premonition of the danger ahead. There was none. The sound of her heartbeat filled her senses once more, and for a single instant, she thought about tearing through the door and running. Just running as fast and hard as she could until she was sure that none of it was really happening. The World Trade Center hadn't been attacked; hadn't collapsed to the ground. Jake's unit hadn't responded to the Twin Towers, surely not.

But running would do no good now.

Jamie searched the kitchen, desperately trying to think of who she could call. As she did, her eyes fell on the figurine she'd painted for Jake three days earlier. A firefighter with an angel over his shoulder. But angels weren't real, and there was only one way she could make sure Jake was okay.

She'd have to go to the scene herself.

Jamie grabbed her purse and keys and raced for the van. Eight minutes later she pulled up to a massive traffic jam near the ferry docks. Police officers were waving at the motorists, saying something Jamie couldn't quite make out. She rolled down her window, and suddenly she saw it. One of the Twin Towers was missing. It wasn't a joke or a lie or a hoax. It had really happened. The skyline was grotesquely changed, forever disfigured.

The south tower of the World Trade Center had completely disappeared. In its place was only billowing smoke and ash some twenty stories into the air. The remaining tower was still a blazing inferno.

An officer approached her. "I'm afraid you'll have to clear the area, ma'am."

"I need to find my husband! He's a firefighter in Manhattan."

"I'm sorry." The man's face was taut and pale. "No one's allowed into the city. Port Authority's closed down every entrance. The only ferry service available is leaving Manhattan, not entering it."

"But my husband didn't drive today." She looked away from the officer and back at the single tower still standing, still burning. "With ... with all the craziness around the World Trade Center, he won't be able to get to the ferry docks and what if—"

"Ma'am ..."

The officer held up his hand and waited until Jamie looked at him. His voice was firm. "No one's allowed into the city. No one." His expression softened. "I'm sorry. Why don't you go home and call his station. Maybe someone there knows something."



Jamie wondered what would happen if she ignored the officer and drove through the closed gates, right onto the ferry. The idea fled her mind as quickly as it came. Breaking the law wouldn't help Jake. Besides, the officer was right. She needed to get home and call the station. Maybe Jake and Larry were still there, still waiting for the call. Maybe somehow they'd been left behind to man the station.

She said nothing. Instead, she took a final glance at the disaster across the harbor and then sped home, her eyes wide and unblinking. The moment she was inside, she dialed the station. A recording came on the line. "All circuits are busy. Please try your call later."

"No!" Jamie screamed at the receiver and slammed it on the hook. Maybe Jake had his cell phone. Firefighters didn't usually carry them out on calls, but maybe this time ... Jamie picked up the phone again, punched in the numbers, and waited.

"The caller you are trying to reach is not available at this moment." The computer voice sounded oddly happy, as though it belonged to the only person in New York City unaware of what had happened that morning.

And it *had* happened. There was no denying the fact.

Then she remembered Sue. If anyone would've found something out, it would be Larry's wife, Sue. Jamie knew the number by heart, and she punched it in as fast as she could make her fingers work. Sue answered on the first ring. "Hello?" Panic and anticipation filled her voice in equal amounts. "Who is this?"

"Sue, it's me. Jamie." She remembered to breathe. "What've you heard?"

"I called the department public information line. They don't know anything." Sue hesitated and sniffed back a sob. "We're supposed to ... to stay by the phone and wait for a call. Someone will get in touch with us as soon as they know anything."

Brownie trotted up beside Jamie and licked her fingers.

Jamie absently ran her hand through the dog's soft fur and made her way to the nearest chair. She closed her eyes, terrified about the question she needed to ask. Scared to death that Sue would know the answer. "Sue ..."

"Oh, Jamie ... it feels like the end of the world."

"Sue ..." The room began to spin again. "Did they tell you if our guys went to the scene?"

"Yes." A series of sobs sounded over the phone line. "Engine 57 reported to the ... to the south tower."

"The south tower?" Jamie hung her head and squeezed her eyes shut. She had to fight to keep her balance even on the sofa. Brownie began to whimper. "Are you sure?"

"Yes, but that ... that doesn't mean they were caught in the collapse. Lots of them got out, Jamie." Sue took three quick breaths. "We have to believe they're okay."

"What're we supposed to do?" Jamie opened her eyes, but all she could see was the south tower of the World Trade Center disappearing in a giant cloud of debris.

Over and over and over again.

"Get off the phone and wait. Someone will call us as soon as they find them."

Jamie raked her fingers hard through her hair. She had to get a grip. "Okay." Sue was right ... the guys were fine. They had to be. Her teeth chattered and she struggled to speak. "G—g—good idea." Jamie ended the call and walked halfway to the TV, her steps slow and robotic. The scene was the same one she'd seen from the ferry docks. One tower standing, the other vanished.

A news anchor was on the scene a few blocks from the World Trade Center. His face was dirty, his jacket covered with thick dust. "... reports that more than a hundred firefighters may have been trapped in the south tower in the moments before it collapsed." The man was shouting, trying to

be heard over the chaos on the street. “Apparently, they had no real warning that the tower was coming down and ...”

Jamie blinked and the sound from the TV faded. More than a hundred firefighters? A *hundred*? It wasn't possible. And if Jake's station had responded to that building, then as many as eighteen, including Jake and Larry, might have taken the call. Both the night and day shifts. Nausea built within her and she gripped her stomach. A hundred firefighters? It was unthinkable, too massive to comprehend.

She pictured Jake and Larry, hurrying up the stairs to whoever needed their help. If anyone would've stayed in the building, they would've. And that could only mean one thing. Jamie began moving again, crossing the room until she reached the television. He couldn't have been in there ... he would have found a way out, just as he always did whenever he fought a fire. But if a hundred firefighters had been in the building ...

She placed her hand on the dusty TV screen, over the hazy image of smoke and dust still billowing from the collapsed area. “Jake!” She screamed his name, and the sound of it bounced around the room. “Jake ... no! No!”

Then, with her hand still on the cold glass, still gently touching the place where Jake was, she collapsed slowly to the floor.

And for the first time that morning, Jamie hung her head and wept.

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In Los Angeles Laura Michaels was starting to lose it.

She'd done what Murphy said; she'd waited more than an hour for Eric to call. When the south tower collapsed, just after ten o'clock on the East Coast, she did the math. At one floor per minute, Eric would've barely had time to escape the building. But now it was ten-thirty—seven-thirty her time—and still Eric hadn't called.

As a way of passing time, Laura had focused all her energy into helping Josh get ready for school. The boy wanted to go, and there was nothing he could do by staying home. If the news about Eric wasn't good,

Laura would rather tell Josh later after she'd had time to absorb the shock. Besides, school would be good for him; better than a day of watching TV reports and seeing unimaginable images flashed across the screen again and again.

Laura pulled a loaf of wheat bread, a string cheese, and a juice pack from the refrigerator. The feel of it in her hands made her stomach turn, and she glanced at the clock on the microwave. Seven-thirty-three. She opened the twist-tie on the bread, took two slices out, and laid them on a paper towel. *Breathe, Laura ... keep breathing.* A layer of peanut butter on one slice, blueberry jam over another.

Josh stood nearby, dressed in a blue T-shirt and sweatpants, his hair neatly combed.

He hadn't asked about Eric since he first saw the fires.

"Are you scared, Mom?" He crossed the kitchen, grabbed a bag of cheese crackers, and tossed them on the counter next to his sandwich.

Laura glanced at the clock again. Seven-thirty-five. She turned and looked at Josh. What had he just asked her? Something about being afraid? She slipped the sandwich into a plastic bag. "Yes." Her fingers weren't shaking now, but anxiety gripped her heart and made it feel unsteady, balanced on the edge of an endless abyss of devastation. She leaned back against the counter. "I guess I am afraid."

"Did he call yet?" Josh opened his lunch box and began to pack it.

"No." Laura tried to read her son's emotions as she reached for a napkin and tucked it in beside his lunch. "Not yet." She shifted her gaze. Seven-thirty-seven. *God ... why hasn't he called? Help him get through to me ...*

Josh locked his lunch box and stared out the front window. Laura's heart broke for the child. He had to be thinking about the disaster in New York, otherwise he wouldn't be asking questions. But his eyes were strangely flat. Was he denying the possibility that something had happened to Eric? Or was he really not that worried? Or worse, maybe Josh's lack of

reaction was the result of one very sad obvious fact. The child felt no connection to his father.

Laura moved from the counter to the other side of the kitchen and put her hands on her son's shoulders. "He'll call. Any minute now."

Josh blinked. "But if he doesn't, does that mean he's dead?"

"Josh!" Laura's voice was louder than she intended it to be. Her hands fell to her side and her jaw dropped. "Don't talk like that! I'm sure he made it out. It'll just take a while before he can call us."

Her son looked at her for a few seconds. Then, with an expression utterly void of emotion, he took his lunch box into the front room, sat down, and stared out the window.

"What're you doing?" Laura trailed behind him.

"Waiting for my ride." There was anger in Josh's tone now, and Laura felt her heart constrict.

Laura sat down a few inches from her son. "Josh, I'm sorry I yelled. It's just ..." Her voice faded, and for the first time that morning, tears stung at her eyes. "I have to believe he'll call. You understand that, don't you?"

Josh turned around and faced her. "Who cares?" The boy's chin quivered, but his eyes were dry and determined. "He didn't even tell me good-bye."

Her son's words hurt worse than any other news from the day. Worse than Eric's phone call that morning, worse than watching the plane crash into his building. Her suspicions had been right all along. The years of silence and missed opportunities, the list of broken promises and months of absences had severed any hope of a bond between her husband and their son. Whether Eric came home or not, Josh didn't have a father.

And it was all Eric's fault.

Laura let the sorrow spill from her heart. She pulled Josh close and buried her face against the top of his head, her tears mingling with his blonde hair, and leaving them both wet. "Josh ... I'm sorry. Your dad loves you."

She could feel the anger leave her son's small body, but when he pulled back, his eyes were still dry. "I know, Mom. I want Dad to be okay. And I'm sorry you're scared." He gave her a crooked, wistful smile far older than his years. "He'll call any minute."

A car pulled up outside and Laura sighed. "Your ride's here."

They both stood and Josh kissed her cheek. "I love you, Mom. See ya after school."

"Love you too."

She watched him go, begging God that somehow, when Eric came home—and he would come home—they could talk about their problems and find a way to work them out. Josh needed his father to spend time with him, take an interest in his soccer and schoolwork. Most of all he needed Eric to tell him he loved him.

Laura returned to the kitchen and checked the clock once more. Seven-forty-one. She positioned herself near the phone and stared at it. *Come on, Eric ... call me. God, make him call me. Please ...*

Her silent prayer was pierced by the ringing of the phone. Laura was so surprised she jumped back and stared at it for a moment. It took two rings before she grabbed the receiver. "Hello?" She was breathless, certain Eric's voice would sound any second on the other end.

"Laura ... it's me."

She was unable to speak, overwhelmed with relief. It was Eric; he'd survived, after all. But as soon as the thought raced through her mind, so did the doubts. If it was Eric, why was it so quiet in the background? He still had to be in the middle of downtown Man—

"Laura, it's Clay ... are you there?"

She swallowed back a sob. "I ... I thought you were Eric."

"I just woke up. Laura ... are you watching it?" His voice was tense, frightened. "Eric was there, wasn't he? In the World Trade Center?"

"Yes. He called me right before—" Her composure broke, and three quiet sobs sounded over the phone line. "Right before the second plane

hit.”

“How about since then? Has anyone heard from him?”

“No.” She took a series of quick breaths and saw dark spots dance before her eyes. She had to exhale, had to force herself to stay calm.

“Laura ... are you okay?”

She pinched the bridge of her nose between her thumb and forefinger.

“I'm ... waiting for his call.”

Clay did a loud breath, and his own fear was tangible. “You shouldn't be alone. I'm on my way.”

Clay was right. She needed someone to hold her and tell her everything would be okay, someone who loved Eric as much as she did.

“Please, Clay. Come quick. The waiting is killing me.”

\*\*\*\*\*

Jamie sat frozen on the floor in front of the TV, convinced that at any moment someone from the fire department would call and tell her everything was okay. Suddenly, the image on the screen changed to a live shot of the blazing north tower. Jamie heard the sound of distant shouts and sirens, then, in a surreal almost slow motion, the outer walls of the building peeled back, and it began to collapse. Like a house of cards, in a matter of seconds, the entire structure disappeared, sending a rush of smoke and ash through the streets of Manhattan and causing the cameraman to run for his life.

Raw terror filled Jamie's heart. If a hundred firefighters had died in the south tower collapse, then ...

She stood and knew she had only a few seconds. She raced across the room, tore open the bathroom door, and positioned her face over the toilet. With every heave of her stomach, she prayed the same thing. *Please, God ... not Take!*

When she was finished she wiped her mouth and stared at her face. It was pale and pinched, stonelike. As if she'd aged ten years that morning. She realized then that her mind-set had changed. The frantic sense she'd

had until the collapse of the north tower was gone. There was no fire left to fight, no building left to evacuate. There were two possibilities. Jake had either been in one of the buildings, or he hadn't. If he'd managed to stay outside, Jamie was certain he would have found his way to safety. If he'd been in one of the buildings ...

Fear placed its cold fingers around her throat and squeezed.

"No," she whispered at her reflection. "Not Jake. Please not Jake."

There was nothing to do now, nothing but sit by the phone and wait. Jamie couldn't inhale fully, couldn't will her heart to slow down. Instead, she shuffled out of the bathroom and took the chair closest to the phone. The TV played on in the background, and Brownie let out an occasional quiet whine. But Jamie didn't really hear any of it. There was only one sound that mattered, one sound that would give her permission to kick fear in the gut and send it on its way. The sound of the phone ringing, and a voice on the other end telling Jamie that Jake was all right.

She stared at the receiver, unable to fathom anything else, unable to blink. It would happen, it had to. Jake was okay. He had found a way to save himself, and Larry too. The phone call would come any minute, and that night they would talk about what could've happened.

They would order take-out Chinese food, and Jake could give Sierra horsey rides for an hour straight if she wanted. They would make love and hold each other, grateful that Jake hadn't been hurt. It was all going to be okay. It had to be; Jake had promised her.

And not once in all her life had Jake Bryan ever broken a promise.

## **Twaalf**

11 September 2001 09:56

Jamie weet nie van die aanvalle nie.

Sy het die negeur-aërobiese klas by die Staten Island Fitness Center gaan bywoon, en dis net na tien toe sy haar handdoek om haar nek gooi en met die trappies na die portaal afgaan. Dis alles deel van Jamie se roetine. Nadat sy van nege tot tien geoefen het, gaan sy reguit kledkamer toe, stort en gaan kry



Sierra in die speelkamer. Daarvandaan gaan hulle vir 'n uitstappie na die park waar hulle 'n uur lank speel voordat hulle huis toe gaan vir middagete.

Maar toe sy vanoggend die portaal bereik, steek sy vas. Daar is 'n samedromming van gimnasium-gangers rondom die televisie teen die muur. Van waar sy staan, kan Jamie nie die beeld sien nie.

'n Vrou met 'n paar tekkies in haar hand draai weg en loop in die storte se rigting. Haar oë is blink van die trane.

“Verskoon my ...” Jamie keer haar voor. 'n Verskriklike vrees maak dat sy skaars 'n geluid uitkry. Sy kyk vraend na die vrou. “Wat is aan die gang?”

Die vrou staar na haar, die ongeloof op haar gesig geskryf. “Het jy nog nie gehoor nie?”

“Wat?”

“New York is deur terroriste aangeval. Dit het 'n uur gelede gebeur. Die World Trade Center en die Pentagon is aan die brand.”

Jamie se kop begin draai. Hoekom het niemand die oefenklas onderbreek nie? En as die World Trade Center brand, is Jake ... Jamie forseer haarself om nugter te bly. “Terroriste? Was dit 'n bom?”

“Nee.” Die vrou lyk amper bang om verder uit te brei. “Hulle het drie vliegtuie gekaap en met twee van hulle in die World Trade Center vasgevlieg. Die ander een het die Pentagon getref.” Die vrou wys na die televisie. “Dis 'n direkte uitsending.” Sy skud haar kop. “Ek moet by die huis kom. My man werk op die vyftiende vloer van die noordelike toring, en ek het nog nie met hom gepraat vandat ...”

Jamie luister nie meer nie. Sy hardloop deur die portaal en kry staanplek tussen die agterste persone. Voor haar is die verskriklike toneel besig om hom in al sy afskuwelike glorie af te speel. Albei torings is aan die brand; die boonste derde van die geboue is in 'n see van vlamme en rook gehul.

Is die verwoesting deur vliegtuie aangerig? Is hulle deur terroriste gekaap wat opsetlik in die geboue vasgevlieg het? Sy slaan haar arms om haar lyf en voel hoe die vertrek om haar begin tol. Sy wil gaan sit voordat sy flou word, maar sy kan nie beweeg nie. Haar oë is op die torings vasgenaël en sy trek hulle op skrefies asof sy Jake dalk deur een van die klein venstertjies sal kan sien.

Hy is daar iewers. Sy weet dit vir 'n feit. Jake se stasie is so te sê aan die voet van die World Trade Center geleë. Hulle sal ongetwyfeld op die toneel wees. Jake en Larry en al die ouens van Enjin 57 en Leer 96. Jamie se bors pyn, en sy kan nie ordentlik asemhaal nie.

Die vuur is te groot, te massief. Dit sal onmoontlik geblus kan word, maak nie saak hoeveel brandweermanne hulle kragte teen die vlamme saamsnoer nie. Jamie bal haar vuiste en ignoreer die manier waarop haar naels in haar handpalms grawe. *Kom uit, Jake. Kom, my lief, stap weg. Help die mense op die grond ...*

'n Donkerkop-joernalis verskyn op die televisieskerm, sy gesig asvaal van skok. “Ons het berig ontvang dat 'n derde vliegtuig, American Airways vlug 77, sestien minute gelede in die Pentagon vasgevlieg het. President Bush sê

dat die rampe in New York en Washington, D.C., 'n terroriste-aanval is.” Die nuusprogram sny na regstreekse beeldmateriaal van die brandende World Trade Center, die verslaggewer se stem hoorbaar bo die beelde. “Om saam te vat, die lugruimte bokant die Verenigde State is vir die eerste keer in die geskiedenis gesluit. Twee passasiersvliegtuie het om 8:45 en 9:02 in die World Trade Center vasgevlieg. Na voorlopige beraming is daar honderde mense dood, alhoewel dit baie meer kan wees. Die Twin Towers beskik oor kantoorspasie vir meer as ... ”

Die verslaggewer bly stil.

Skielik borrel daar 'n massiewe rookwolk uit die brandende gedeelte van die suidelike toring. Jamie se mond val oop toe die dak van die gebou verdwyn en die hele struktuur in 'n vulkaniese wolk van stof en puin inmekaarsak.

Vir 'n oomblik is dit stil. Niemand praat nie, niemand beweeg nie. 'n Paar mense snak sag na hul asem, maar verder is dit stil. Niemand kan glo wat hulle sopas aanskou het nie. Uiteindelik is dit die verslaggewer wat die stilte verbreek en stotterend sê wat die res van hulle nie durf verwoord nie. “Die ... die suidelike toring van die World Trade Center het sekondes gelede ineengestort. Ek herhaal ... die suidelike toring van die World Trade Center het ineengestort. Dit kan duisende sterftes beteken ... die gebou was vol werknemers en honderde brandweermanne wat ... ”

Jamie druk haar hande oor haar ore en draai eers links, dan regs. Dis onmoontlik. Dit moet 'n fout wees, een of ander vorm van oëverblindery. Die World Trade Center sal nie inmekaarstort nie; dis te sterk, te goed gebou. Maar die beelde is skrikwekkend realisties. Sy kan nie verder kyk nie, wil nie meer van sterftes en ineenstortings hoor nie.

Jake het niks oorgekom nie; sy moet dit glo.

Sy begin loop, hierdie keer in die rondte. Waar is die kleedkamer? Waarom is niks op hulle plek nie? En hoekom staan almal na die televisie en kyk? Dis 'n leuen, 'n bedrogspul. Die World Trade Center is nie aan die brand nie; dis onmoontlik. Nou moet sy net so gou moontlik by die huis kom sodat sy met Jake kan praat.

Dis asof die televisie haar uit alle rigtings bombardeer. Sy klamp haar hande oor haar ore en uiteindelik sien sy die kleedkamer. Sy hardloop soontoe, gryp haar oefensak en haas haar na die speelkamer. In die hoek van die vertrek is 'n klein televisie waarop die ineenstorting weer uitgesaai word. Jamie kyk na die werkers en sien die skadu's in hulle oë. Hulle weet wat besig is om te gebeur.

*Dis 'n leuen, wil sy skree. Daar is niks verkeerd nie!*

Maar Sierra kom op haar afgepyl, haar blou oë helder en onskuldig, totaal onkundig. “Mamma!” Sy klou aan Jamie se bene vas en steek dan haar handjies uit. “Tel my op!”

“Hallo, my skat.” Jamie probeer glimlag, maar dit voel of haar mondhoeke versteen het. “Kom ons gaan huis toe.”

“Wat van die parkie?”

Die drie kinderoppassers vermy haar oë, kyk weg en fluister onderlangs. Een

van hulle huil saggies. Jamie verstaan onmiddellik. Die meisies by die gesondheidsklub weet dat Jamie met 'n brandweerman getroud is; trouens, hulle ken vir Jake. Hy het die afgelope somer 'n paar maal saam met haar kom oefen.

Jamie staar na hulle. “Dis oukei.” Sy druk haar handdoek in haar oefensak, swaai dit oor haar skouer en tel Sierra op haar ander heup. “Julle hoef nie bekommerd te wees nie. Jake was nie in die gebou nie.”

Dis vir 'n paar oomblikke stil voordat een van die vroue 'n hartseer, senuweeagtige glimlaggie gee. “Dis goed.” Sy vou haar arms. “Ek’s bevrees baie van hulle was.”

“Ja, wel, nie Jake nie.” Sy wil vir hulle sê dat die suidelike toring nie regtig neergestort het nie, maar sy sien nie kans vir die gesprek nie. Sy draai sonder 'n verdere woord om en drafstap vinnig na haar motor toe. Sy weet sy is reg. As Jake daar is, sal hy in die noordelike toring wees, die een wat eerste getref is. Sy stasie sou een van die eerstes op die toneel gewees het.

Sy maak Sierra in haar motorstoeltjie vas en stoot haar vingers deur haar natgeswete kuif. Wat maak sy? Die parkeerterrein is vol motors, maar daar is nie 'n siel in sig nie. Almal is in die gimnasium voor die televisie. Dan onthou sy. Sy wil huis toe gaan om vir Jake te bel. Sodat sy met sekerheid kan weet dat daar niks met hom gebeur het nie.

“Wat is fout, Mamma?”

Jamie klim in, skakel die enjin aan en sit die motor in trurat. Terselfdertyd onthou sy dat sy haar oefensak op die plaveisel langs die motor gelos het. “Net 'n oomblik, liefie.” Jamie spring uit, maar sy wil net buk toe die motor stadig agteruit beweeg. Sy struikel en beland amper onder die voorwiel.

Die motor is besig om agteruit te loop!

Sy kry haar sitplek se rugleuning beet en klouter paniekerig terug. Hulle is sentimeters van die motor agter hulle af toe sy skerp rem trap.

Agter haar begin Sierra huil. “Mamma ... wat gebeur? Ek het alleen gery.”

Jamie klem die stuurwiel met albei hande vas en snak na haar asem. “Dis oukei. Mamma is jammer, liefie. Niks gaan met jou gebeur nie.” Haar hart klop onstuimig en die slae eggo deur haar bors en nek. Die sweet pêrel opnuut oor haar voorkop. Met besliste bewegings trek sy die handrem op, klim weer uit, raap die sak op en gooi dit op die sitplek langs haar.

Die klub is net vyf minute van die huis af en toe sy halfpad is, kyk sy na Sierra in die truspieëltjie. “Mamma voel nie so lekker nie. Kom ons kyk of Billy van langsaan wil speel.”

“Oukei.” Haar stem klink steeds onseker. “Is Mamma se magie seer?”

“Ja.” Jamie verstyf haar greep op die stuurwiel. Dis nie 'n leuen nie. “Ek dink ek sal beter voel as ek 'n bietjie gaan lê.”

Nadat hulle voor die huis parkeer het, neem sy Sierra haastig in. Die dogtertjie staan langs Jamie terwyl sy die buurvrou bel. Die vrou is 'n tuisbly-ma van drie, en sy het al aangebied om na Sierra te kyk. Jamie sê vir die vrou ja, sy het die nuus gesien en nee, sy het nog nie van Jake gehoor nie.

“Ek het ’n paar uur nodig ...” Jamie se stem bewe. “Om seker te maak dat hy niks oorgekom het nie.”

“Ag, Jamie, natuurlik.” Die buurvrou begryp onmiddellik. “Jy kan haar sommer nou dadelik bring.”

Twee minute later is Jamie terug by die huis. Die laaste ding wat sy wil doen, is om die verskriklike tonele op televisie te sien. Maar die televisie is haar enigste bron van inligting, die enigste manier waarop enige nuus van die brandweermanne haar kan bereik. Sy het die afstandbeheerder reeds opgetel toe sy die antwoordmasjien se liggie sien flikker.

Jake moes gebel het! Hy is ongedeerd, besig om iewers op ’n veilige afstand van die World Trade Center te help. Sy vlieg tot by die masjien. ’n Rooi nommer drie flikker op die skerm. Drie boodskappe. Jamie hou haar asem op en druk die speelknoppie.

Al drie kom van Jake se selnummer. Die eerste twee is kort boodskappies waarin hy sê dat hy oor ’n paar minute weer sal bel. Sy hou aan die rugleuning van die lessenaarstoel vas toe die derde boodskap begin speel.

“Haai ... dis weer ek.” Jake praat in ’n opgeruimde stem. “Lyk my ons gaan binnekort uitgeroep word, my lief. Alles gaan oukei wees, Jamie. Ek is lief vir jou en sal vanaand by die huis wees, ek belowe. Die Here is by my. O ja, en my engel. Ek mag nie van hom vergeet nie.” Hy aarsel, en toe hy verder praat, is daar meer emosie in sy stem. “Dan sien ek jou later vanaand, oukei? Sê vir Sierra ek’s lief vir haar, my skat.”

Jamie staar na die masjien en die vertrek begin rondom haar draai.

Sy druk die knoppie en luister weer na die boodskap, luister of sy iets soos kommer in sy stem kan hoor, een of ander voorbode van die gevaar wat kom. Maar daar is niks nie. Sy kan steeds haar hart voel klop, die slae hoor, en vir ’n oomblik dink sy daaraan om by die deur uit te storm en te hardloop. Om so vinnig moontlik te hardloop totdat sy seker is dat hierdie ding nie regtig gebeur het nie. Die World Trade Center is nie deur terroriste aangeval nie en het nie ineengestort nie. Jake se eenheid is nie na die Twin Towers toe ontbied nie, vir seker nie.

Maar hardloop sal nie help nie.

Jamie loop kombuis toe terwyl sy naartig dink aan wie sy kan bel. Haar oë val op die beeldjie wat sy drie dae tevore vir Jake geveer het. Die brandweerman met die beskermengel. Maar daar bestaan nie iets soos engele nie, en daar is net een manier waarop sy kan seker maak dat daar niks met Jake gebeur het nie.

Sy sal self moet ry en gaan kyk.

Jamie gryp haar handsak en sleutels en storm by die deur uit. Agt minute later bevind sy haar in ’n reuse verkeersknoep naby die dokke. ’n Paar polisiemanne beduie vir die motoriste en sê iets wat Jamie nie mooi kan uitmaak nie. Sy draai haar venster af en toe sien sy dit. Een van die Twin Towers is weg. Dis nie ’n grap of ’n leuen of ’n truuk nie. Dit het regtig gebeur. Die horison lyk grotesk-anders, vir altyd vermink.

Die suidelike toring van die World Trade Center het heeltemal verdwyn. Al wat oorgebly het, is 'n rookwolk wat twintig verdiepings bo die grond hang. Die oorblywende toring is steeds 'n brandende inferno.

'n Polisieman praat langs haar. "Ek's jammer, maar u sal die area moet verlaat, Mevrou."

"Ek moet my man gaan soek! Hy's 'n brandweerman in Manhattan."

"Ek's jammer." Die man se gesig is strak en bleek. "Niemand word in die stad toegelaat nie. Die hawebestuur het al die ingange na die stad gesluit. Die enigste beskikbare veerbote is dié wat van Manhattan af terugkom."

"Maar my man het nie vandag ingery nie." Sy kyk weg van die man en weer na die alleenstaande brandende toring. "Met al ... al die chaos by die World Trade Center sal hy nie by die veerboot uitkom nie, en sê nou ..."

"Mevrou ... " Die polisieman hou sy hand op en wag totdat Jamie na hom kyk. Sy stem is ferm. "Niemand word in die stad toegelaat nie. Niemand nie." Sy uitdrukking versag. "Ek's jammer. Hoekom gaan u nie huis toe en bel sy stasie nie? Dalk is daar iemand wat iets weet."

Jamie wonder wat sal gebeur as sy die man ignoreer en eenvoudig deur die toegemaakte hekke tot op die boot ry. Die idee sterf 'n vinnige dood. Om die wet te oortree gaan Jake nie help nie. En buitendien, die polisieman is reg. Sy moet by die huis kom en die stasie bel. Dalk is Jake en Larry nog daar; dalk is hulle nog nie uitgeroep nie. Dalk het hulle agtergebly om die stasie te beman. Sy sê niks nie. Nadat sy nog 'n keer na die ramp aan die oorkant van die hawe gekyk het, jaag sy huis toe, haar oë starend op die pad voor haar. By die huis gekom, bel sy dadelik die stasie. 'n Meganiese stem antwoord. "Al die lyne is op die oomblik besig. Probeer asseblief weer later."

"Nee!" Jamie skree op die gehoorstuk en smyt dit terug op die haak. Dalk het Jake sy selfoon by hom. Hy neem dit gewoonlik nie saam wanneer hulle uitgeroep word nie, maar dalk het hy hierdie keer ... Jamie tel die foon weer op, skakel sy nommer en wag.

"Die persoon wat u probeer bereik, is tans nie beskikbaar nie." Die rekenaarstem klink vreemd opgewek, asof dit aan die enigste persoon in New York behoort wat onbewus is van wat vanoggend gebeur het.

En dit hét gebeur. Dis 'n onbetwisbare feit.

Toe dink sy aan Sue. As daar enigiemand is wat iets sou kon uitvind, is dit Larry se vrou, Sue. Jamie ken die nommer uit haar kop en sy pons dit met oorhaastige vingers in. Sue antwoord na die eerste lui. "Hallo?" Haar stem tegelykertyd paniekerig en vol afwagting. "Wie is dit?"

"Sue, dis ek. Jamie." Sy onthou om asem te haal. "Het jy al iets gehoor?"

"Ek het die brandweer se inligtingslyn geskakel, maar hulle kan my niks sê nie." Sue huiwer en gee 'n gesmoorde snik. "Ons is veronderstel om ... om by die telefoon te bly en vir 'n oproep te wag. Hulle sal ons kontak so gou hulle iets uitvind."

Brownie kom stertswaaiend in en lek aan haar vingers.

Jamie vryf afwesig oor die hond se sagte pels en gaan sit op die naaste stoel.

Sy maak haar oë toe, angsbevange oor die volgende vraag wat sy moet vra. Doodbang dat Sue die antwoord sal ken. “Sue ... ”

“O, Jamie ... dit voel soos die einde van die wêreld.”

“Sue ... ” Die kamer begin weer om haar tol. “Het hulle vir jou gesê of die ouens na die toneel ontbied is?”

“Ja.” Sue se snikke kom nou ongehinderd. “Enjin 57 is na die ... suidelike toring ontbied.”

“Die suidelike toring?” Jamie laat sak haar kop en knyp haar oë toe. Sy sukkel om regop te bly, selfs hier op die bank. Brownie begin tjank. “Is jy seker?”

“Ja, maar dit ... dit beteken nie hulle was met die ineenstorting in die gebou nie. Baie van hulle het uitgekom, Jamie.” Sue haal drie keer vinnig asem. “Ons moet glo dat hulle oukei is.”

“Wat is ons veronderstel om te doen?” Jamie maak haar oë oop, maar al wat sy bly sien, is hoe die suidelike toring van die World Trade Center in ’n reuse wolk puin verdwyn.

Weer en weer en weer.

“Om die telefoon neer te sit en te wag. Iemand sal ons bel sodra hulle hulle kry.”

Jamie kam met haar vingers deur haar hare. Sy moet haarself beheers. “Oukei.” Sue is reg ... die ouens makeer niks nie. Natuurlik nie. Haar tande klapper op mekaar en sy praat moeilik. “O-ons praat weer.” Jamie lui af en loop soos ’n outomaat tot voor die televisie. Toe sy die toestel aanskakel, word sy deur dieselfde toneel begroet as wat sy van die dokke af gesien het. Dié van ’n enkele toring teen die stadsilhoeë.

’n Verslaggewer is op die toneel ’n paar blokke van die World Trade Center af. Sy gesig is vuil, sy baadjie vaal onder ’n dik laag stof. “... berigte dat oor die honderd brandweermanne oomblikke voor die ineenstorting in die suidelike toring vasgekeer was.” Die man moet gil om bo die chaos op straat gehoor te word. “Oënskynlik het hulle nie ’n waarskuwing ontvang dat die toring sou inmekaarstort nie ... ”

Jamie knipper haar oë en die man se stem vervaag. Oor die honderd brandweermanne? *Honderd*? Dis onmoontlik. En as Jake se stasie na daardie gebou ontbied is, sou al agtien, Jake en Larry inkluis, op die oproep reageer het. Die dag- sowel as die nagskof. Die naarheid stoot in haar op en sy vou haar arms oor haar maag. Meer as honderd brandweermanne? Dis ondenkbaar, onverteerbaar oorweldigend.

In haar gedagtes sien sy Jake en Larry boontoe hardloop na wie ook al hulle hulp nodig het. As enigiemand in die gebou sou bly, sou dit hulle wees. En dit kan net een ding beteken. Jamie kom in beweging en loop deur die vertrek tot by die televisie. Hy kon nie daarbinne wees nie ... hy sou ’n pad uit gekry het, nes altyd wanneer hy hom in ’n brandende gebou bevind. Maar as daar honderd brandweermanne in die gebou was ...

Sy plaas haar hand op die televisieskerm, oor die dynserige beeld van rook en stof wat steeds bo die area hang. “Jake!” Sy skree sy naam sodat die klank

teen die mure vasslaan. “Jake ... nee! Nee!”

Toe, met haar hand steeds liggies op die koue glas, op die plek waar Jake nou is, syg sy stadig op die vloer neer.

En vir die eerste keer daardie oggend laat Jamie haar kop hang en huil.

In Los Angeles is Laura Michaels buite haarself.

Sy het gemaak soos Murphy gesê het; sy het vir meer as ’n uur gewag dat Eric haar bel. Toe die suidelike toring net na tien neerstort, het sy die berekeninge gedoen. As hulle een vloer per minuut kon vorder, sou Eric net-net genoeg tyd hê om te ontsnap. Maar nou is dit halfelf – halfagt by haar – en Eric het nog nie gebel nie.

Om haar besig te hou, gebruik Laura al haar energie om Josh te help regmaak vir skool. Die seuntjie wil gaan, en dit sou sinneloos wees om hom by die huis te hou. As daar slegte nuus oor Eric is, sal Laura Josh eerder later vertel nadat sy tyd gehad het om die ergste skok te verwerk. Buitendien, dit sal hom goedgehoed om te gaan, eerder dít as om heeldag televisie te kyk en die verskriklike beelde herhaaldelik op die skerm te sien afspeel.

Laura haal ’n brood, kaas en ’n sappie uit die yskas. Die idee van kos laat haar naars voel en sy kyk na die horlosie op die mikrogolfoond: 07:33. Sy maak die broodsakkie oop en haal twee snye uit. *Haal net asem, Laura ... haal asem.* Sy smeer die een sny met grondboontjiegat, die ander met stroop.

Josh kom staan in die kombuis. Hy dra ’n blou T-hemp en sweetpakkbroek, en sy hare is netjies gekam.

Hy het nie weer oor Eric uitgevra sedert hy die brand die eerste keer gesien het nie.

“Is Mamma bang?” Hy loop deur die kombuis, haal ’n pakkie soutbeskuitjies uit en gooi dit langs sy broodjie neer.

Laura kyk weer na die horlosie. 07:35. Sy draai na Josh. Wat het hy nou net vir haar gevra? Iets van bang wees? Sy sit die toebroodjie in ’n plastieksakkie.

“Ja.” Haar vingers bewe nie meer nie, maar die angstige klop van haar hart laat haar voel asof sy op die rand van ’n bodemlose afgrond staan. Sy leun teen die toonbank. “Ek is bang.”

“Het hy nog nie gebel nie?” Josh maak sy kosklik oop en begin sy kos inpak.

“Nee.” Laura probeer haar seun se emosies peil toe sy ’n servet langs sy kosklik indruk. “Nog nie.” Haar oë gaan vanself na die mikrogolf. 07:37.

*Here, hoekom het hy nog nie gebel nie? Help hom om na my toe deur te kom*

...

Josh maak sy kosklik toe en staan deur die voorste venster. Laura se hart breek vir haar kind. Hy moet aan die ramp in New York dink, anders sou hy nie vroeër gevra het nie. Maar sy oë is vreemd uitdrukkingloos. Is dit omdat hy die moontlikheid ontken dat daar enigiets met Eric gebeur het? Of is hy nie regtig so bekommerd nie? Of erger nog, dalk is Josh se emosielose reaksie die gevolg van ’n ooglopende, tragiese feit. Die kind het geen band met sy pa nie. Laura loop tot by Josh en plaas haar hande op sy skouers. “Hy sal bel. Nou enigiens oomblik.”

Josh knip sy oë. “Maar as hy nie bel nie? Sê nou hy is dood?”

“Josh!” Laura praat harder as wat sy bedoel het. Haar hande val na haar sye en haar mond gaan oop. “Moenie so praat nie! Ek is seker hy het betyds uitgekóm. Dit neem net ’n rukkie voordat hy ons kan bel.”

Haar seun kyk vir ’n paar oomblikke na haar. Toe neem hy sy kosblik en loop uitdrukkingloos woonkamer toe waar hy gaan sit en deur die venster kyk.

“Wat doen jy?” Laura loop agter hom aan.

“Ek wag vir my lift.” Daar is nou woede in Josh se stem en Laura voel hoe haar eie hart ineenkrimp.

Sy gaan sit langs Josh. “Josh, ek’s jammer ek’t geskree. Dis net ... ” Haar stem raak weg en vir die eerste keer die oggend brand die trane in haar oë.

“Ek moet glo hy gaan bel. Jy verstaan dit, nê?”

Josh kyk na haar. “Wie gee om?” Die seun se ken bewe, maar sy oë is droog en vasberade. “Hy het my nie eens gegroet nie.”

Haar seun se woorde maak seerder as enige nuus die oggend. Seerder as Eric se oproep die oggend, seerder as om die vliegtuig in sy gebou te sien vasvlieg. Haar vermoedens was reg. Die jare lange stilte, verlore geleenthede en maande lange afwesigheid het die moontlikheid van ’n band tussen haar man en hulle seun vernietig. Of Eric terugkom of nie, Josh het nie ’n pa nie.

En dis alles Eric se skuld.

Laura laat haar seer oorloop. Sy trek Josh teen haar vas en laat sak haar kop sodat haar trane sy blonde hare natmaak. “Josh ... ek’s jammer. Jou pa is lief vir jou.”

Sy kan die woede uit sy lyfie voel vloei, maar toe hy opkyk, is sy oë steeds sonder trane. “Ek weet, Mamma. Ek wil hê Pappa moet oukei wees. En ek’s jammer dat Mamma bang is.” Hy gee haar ’n skewe, weemoedige glimlag en lyk skielik ouer as sy agt jaar. “Hy sal nou-nou bel.”

’n Motor hou stil en Laura sug. “Tannie Joan is hier.”

Hulle albei staan op en Josh soen haar op die wang. “Ek is lief vir Mamma. Sien Ma vanmiddag.”

“Lief vir jou ook.”

Sy kyk hom agterna en smee God dat wanneer Eric huis toe kom – en hy sal kom – hulle oor hulle probleme kan praat en op ’n manier daardeur kan werk. Josh het ’n pa nodig wat vir hom tyd maak, wat in sy kind se sokker en skoolwerk belangstel. Maar bowenal moet Eric vir hom sê dat hy vir hom lief is.

Laura gaan terug kombuis toe en kyk weer na die horlosie. 07:40. Sy gaan staan by die telefoon en staar na die toestel. *Kom tog, Eric ... bel my. Here, laat hy my bel. Asseblief ...*

Haar gebed word deur die skel gelui van die telefoon onderbreek. Laura is so verras dat sy terugspring en ’n oomblik lank net daarna kyk. Dit neem twee luie voordat sy die gehoorstuk gryp. “Hallo?” Sy wag uitasem om Eric se stem aan die ander kant te hoor.

“Laura ... dis ek.”



Haar verligting is so groot dat sy nie kan praat nie. Dis Eric; hy het oorleef. Maar onmiddellik volg die twyfel. As dit Eric is, waarom is dit so stil in die agtergrond? Hy moet nog in die middel van Man.. –

“Laura, dis Clay ... is jy daar?”

Sy onderdruk ’n snik. “Ek ... ek’t gedog dis Eric.”

“Ek het nou net wakker geword. Laura, kyk jy televisie?” Hy klink gespanne, bang. “Eric was daar, nè? In die World Trade Center?”

“Ja. Hy het my gebel net voor ...” Sy verloor haar selfbeheersing en begin sag snik. “Net voordat die tweede vliegtuig ingekom het.”

“En daarna? Het enigiemand al van hom gehoor?”

“Nee.” Sy haal ’n paar keer vinnig asem en swart spikkels begin voor haar oë dans. Sy moet haar asem uitblaas, moet haarself dwing om te kalmeer.

“Laura, is jy oukei?”

Sy knyp haar neusbrug tussen haar duim en wysvinger vas. “Ek ... wag dat hy moet bel.”

Clay se eie vrees is voelbaar toe hy sy asem diep intrek. “Jy moenie nou alleen wees nie. Ek kom nou.”

Clay is reg. Sy het nodig dat iemand haar vashou en vir haar sê dat alles sal regkom, iemand wat net so lief is vir Eric soos sy. “Asseblief, Clay. Kom gou. Die wag maak my dood.”

Jamie sit versteen op die vloer voor die televisie, seker daarvan dat iemand van die brandweerstasie haar nou gaan bel en sê dat alles reg is. Skielik word die beeld vervang deur ’n direkte skoot van die brandende noordelike toring. Jamie hoor gille en sirenes in die verte en toe, in ’n surrealistiese amper stadige aksie, sien sy hoe die buitemure van die gebou losraak en begin val. Binne ’n kwessie van sekondes het die hele struktuur soos ’n kaarthuis verdwyn. Die rook en as golf soos ’n brander deur die strate en dan begin die kameraman hardloop.

’n Rou angs neem van Jamie besit. As honderd brandweermanne in die suidelike toring vasgeval het, dan ...

Sy staan op en weet sy het net ’n paar sekondes. Sy hardloop deur die vertrek, pluk die badkamerdeur oop en gaan buk oor die toilet. Met elke sametrekking van haar maag bid sy oor en oor dieselfde gebed. *Asseblief, God ... nie Jake nie!*

Toe sy klaar is, vee sy haar mond af en staar na haar gesig. Dis bleek en strak, asof uit klip gekap. Asof sy vanoggend tien jaar ouer geword het. Sy besef dat haar emosies gedraai het. Die paniek wat sy ervaar het totdat die noordelike toring geval het, is weg. Daar is nie meer ’n brand nie, nie ’n gebou wat ontruim moet word nie. Daar is twee moontlikhede. Of Jake was in een van die geboue, of hy was nie. As hy buite was, is Jamie seker hy sou iewers skuiling gevind het. As hy in een van die geboue was ...

Die vrees sluit soos koue vingers om haar keel.

“Nee,” fluister sy vir haar spieëlbeeld. “Nie Jake nie. Asseblief tog nie Jake nie.”

Daar is niks wat sy kan doen buiten om by die foon te sit en wag nie. Jamie kan nie behoorlik inasem nie, kan haar hart nie maak stadiger klop nie. Sy strompel uit die badkamer en gaan sit op die stoel naaste aan die telefoon. Die televisie speel op die agtergrond, en Brownie gee elke nou en dan 'n sagte tjankie. Maar Jamie is onbewus daarvan. Daar is net een geluid wat saak maak, een geluid wat haar sal toelaat om haar verlammeende vrees in die bek te ruk en die nek in te slaan. Die telefoon se gelui, en 'n stem aan die ander kant wat vir Jamie sê dat Jake dit gemaak het.

Sy staar na die gehoorstuk, magteloos om aan enigiets anders te dink, om haar oë te knip. Die telefoon gaan nou begin lui, dit moet. Jake is veilig. Hy sou 'n manier gekry het om homself te red, en vir Larry. Die foonoproep gaan nou enige oomblik kom, en vanaand sal hulle praat oor wat kon gebeur het.

Hulle sal Chinese wegneemkos eet en Jake kan Sierra 'n uur lank op sy rug laat ry as sy wil. Hulle sal liefde maak en mekaar vashou, dankbaar dat Jake nie seergekry het nie. Alles sal soos altyd wees; dit moet wees. Jake het haar belowe.

En vandat sy hom ken, het Jake Bryan nog nooit 'n belofte verbreek nie.

# Chapter THIRTEEN

SEPTEMBER 11, 2001, 10:33 A.M.

The dust was still thick, but Captain Aaron Hisel didn't care.

He was fifty-two years old, a veteran with mild asthma, but he was going back in if it killed him. There was no telling how many firefighters and civilians were trapped in the rubble. Most of them had to be dead, but as awful as the collapse was, someone might have survived. Every second counted, and he was desperate to make his way to the place where—only an hour earlier—the World Trade Center had stood. The past sixty minutes had been a series of terrifying nightmares, none of which seemed even remotely possible.

After arriving at the scene, Hisel and the men from Ladder 96 had reached the twelfth floor when they'd come across a group of handicapped people waiting alone in an office.

The firefighters had been able to get the disabled workers onto their backs, down the stairs, and outside to a transport bus half a block down from the World Trade Center. They'd been loading the people on the bus when the south tower collapsed.

“Run!” Hisel had shouted, and the entire unit scrambled into a nearby café.

“Our guys are in that building!” one of the men had shouted as they darted under tables. “The whole unit!”

The thunderous roar had echoed to the core of Hisel's being. When it finally stopped, he did a head count. Each of the eight men from Ladder 96 was accounted for. Their rescue of the handicapped workers had saved their lives.

“Okay,” Hisel had told the men. “Let's go find our guys.”

Lifting his shirt to cover his mouth, he led the others on a charge toward the collapsed south tower. But chaos reigned, and it was impossible

to make progress. It took twenty minutes to reach West Street, and by then the warning was being sounded.

The north tower was about to go!

Once more Hisel and the rest of Ladder 96 ran for their lives and this time found shelter in a small flower shop a block away. Minutes later they felt the ground rumble and heard the same awful, unforgettable roar. The force of debris that followed the collapse of the north tower was like nothing Hisel had ever seen. It reminded him of footage he'd seen from Hurricane Andrew. Only this was worse, more like an atomic bomb, hurtling through the air waves of crushed cement, shards of glass, sections of walls, and automobiles. Even inside the store, each of his men had been knocked to the ground from the force of the collapse.

At one point a body had blown past them.

Then slowly, the air had cleared enough to barely see across the street. That's when Hisel had assessed his men one more time and ordered them to pair up.

"It's thick enough to get lost." Hisel wasn't a barker like Maxwell, but he wanted to sound adamant on this point. He coughed twice. "The rubble will be unstable. There'll be pockets, some twenty, thirty feet deep or more. And remember, that jet fuel's still burning."

Hisel didn't have to say the obvious. The death toll among firefighters was bound to be devastating. They headed once more toward West Street, where they'd parked their trucks just an hour ago. Hisel tried not to stare through the smoke at the sickening space in the sky where the towers had stood. Instead, he kept his eyes down, leading his men through a maze of debris and destroyed vehicles. Two inches of gray-white, siltlike ash covered everything, including body parts.

If Maxwell and the men from Engine 57 were still alive, it'd be a miracle.

Finally they reached the foot of a mountain of debris. Though the air was hazy and vehicles lay crushed all around them, Hisel had no doubt:

This pile of broken cement and glass and crushed steel was all that remained of the south tower. He directed the men to spread out in pairs.

“Remember what I said.” He nodded at them and coughed again. “Be careful. Look out for each other. We need to get in there, find our guys, and get back to the station. I want every man accounted for.”

They set out, and Hisel thought about his words. No matter what the evidence before them suggested, he had to believe, had to hope. He nodded to one of the station's probies, Joe Landers, and the two of them took off together, walking along West Street.

“I want to find the rigs.” Hisel coughed again. “Just in case any of the men made it back to the engines.”

Landers nodded and kept his eyes on the ground.

As they walked, Hisel's cough grew worse. Acrid smoke burned his lungs, and he could taste the ash in his mouth. He stopped and bent at the waist, working to catch his breath. If he didn't find a way to filter the air, he'd have to turn back.

“You okay, Captain?” Landers was using a shirt to cover his mouth.

“Yeah.” He coughed again, this time until he could feel his blood rushing to his face. “Just slow.”

Why hadn't he covered his mouth earlier? He ripped his shirt open and grabbed the white T-shirt beneath. Shoving it up against his nose and mouth, he finally caught his breath, and they continued down the street.

Through the dense, smoky air they continued. Fire trucks—most of them destroyed—lined their path. But none of them belonged to Engine 57 or Ladder 96. They walked on, and then, up ahead, Hisel could just make out a pair of trucks. One was smashed to half its size, but the other ... the other was still standing. “Those are the station rigs, aren't they?” He picked up his pace.

“Yeah.” Landers kept up, his tone excited. “Looks like it.”

Hisel was about to yell out, to see if anyone could hear him, when he saw something move beneath one of the trucks, the one that looked less

damaged.

“Did you see that?” Landers stopped and stared at the spot where the movement had come from.

They were still thirty yards away, when a man crawled out from beneath the truck on his belly and then struggled to his knees.

Hisel and Landers ran to him, desperate to make out his face. When they were five yards away, Hisel stopped short. “Jake Bryan?” The captain let his head fall back and hooted out loud. “Jake Bryan! Yes! You made it!”

Jake blinked and swayed some. He was covered in ash, his head bleeding, and he had what looked like burns and scrapes over most of his face. In addition, his shoes had been blown off. There was no telling where his uniform was, but Hisel was certain the man was Jake.

“Hey, JB!” Landers reached him first. “Where's everyone else?”

“What ...” Jake's eyes looked funny. He struggled to stand, and Hisel grabbed his arm.

“Steady, JB ... take it slow.”

Jake got one foot under him, but as soon as he set his other one down, his knees buckled, and he went limp. Hisel eased him onto the ground and felt the pulse in his wrist. It was weak and racing. “He needs help.”

“Head injury.” Landers stooped over Jake.

“At least.” Hisel pointed Landers to the rig. “Check it out. See if anyone else is under there, or maybe inside the cab. We're still missing eight men.”

Landers jogged toward the fire truck while Hisel slid JB's eyelids up and examined them. They were equal, but too dilated, even for the cloud of smoke they were standing in. “Can you hear me, Jake?”

JB didn't move. He was unconscious. And depending on his injuries, if they didn't get him help fast, he might not make it.

Landers returned and met Hisel's eyes. “No one's there, sir. No men at all.” He was breathless as he shot a quick look at JB. “How is he?”

“Bad. Help me.” Hisel crouched down and scooped Jake into a chair-carry position. Moving as fast as he could, Landers took up his place on the other side of Jake and did the same.

With his free hand, Hisel kept his T-shirt smothered against his face. He only coughed twice as they struggled back down West Street and finally found a waiting ambulance. Two paramedics saw them coming and grabbed a stretcher.

“Where'd you find him?” one of them asked as he helped Hisel and Landers position JB on the stretcher.

“He's a firefighter. Jake Bryan from Engine 57.” Hisel's sides heaved, but he hadn't felt better in all his life. If Jake got help right away, he would make it. Hisel was sure.

With expert quickness, the paramedic strapped JB to the stretcher and began an intravenous line. “I know JB. We've worked lots of jobs together.” The paramedic looked up and met Hisel's eyes. “Where's his buddy, Larry?”

“We didn't find him. The rest of the men from Engine 57 are ...” Hisel sunk his hands into his pockets and realized something. If the men he'd sent out to handle the search didn't find the missing men, they might all be dead. Eight firefighters from one station. Even more devastating was the fact that every other station in Manhattan had to be facing similar casualties. The enormity of the department's loss was something Hisel refused to consider yet. He cleared his throat but couldn't find his voice.

Landers stepped up and finished the thought. “The rest of the men are missing. We have teams of firefighters looking for them. That's how we found JB.”

The paramedics worked to load Jake into the waiting ambulance. One climbed into the back with JB, and the other shut the doors and headed for the driver's seat. “He'll be at Mount Sinai Medical Center,” the driver shouted as he climbed in the front seat. “Someone call his wife.”

Hisel and Landers watched the ambulance pull away, sirens blaring.

When the sound had faded some, Landers drew a deep breath. “You ever meet Jake's wife?”

“Jamie?” Hisel's voice sounded choked. The events of the day were catching up to him, and a cold wind blew across the plains of his heart. He was not a man who cried easily or who expressed his emotions without being prompted. But here, standing in the ashes of the World Trade Center, facing the loss of hundreds of firefighters, Hisel had the strangest longing to find a quiet spot and simply weep. Of course that was impossible; the rescue was nowhere near finished. He exhaled slow and easy, steadying himself. “Sure, I've met her.”

“Yeah, well ...” For a moment it looked like Landers wanted to cry too. Instead, he sucked in hard and gave a shake of his head as he patted the back of the ambulance. “Tonight, when I can't fall asleep because of the people we lost down here, I'm gonna think about Jamie Bryan. We may have to call a lot of wives and tell them their men are missing. But Jamie won't be one of them.”

Landers was right. Headquarters needed to be contacted immediately. People were no doubt frantic trying to find out who had survived and who was missing. He grabbed his radio from his back pocket and pushed a series of buttons. “This is Captain Aaron Hisel with Ladder 96. All of our men are accounted for and searching the rubble for survivors.” He hesitated. “Their wives need to know they're okay.”

There was static at the other end, and Hisel had to put his hand over his other ear to hear the dispatcher. “I'm sorry, I missed that.”

“We'll make the calls.” This time the words were clearer. “What about Engine 57 from your station? The unit was assigned to the sixty-first floor, south tower, is that right?”

“Right.” Hisel felt sick to his stomach at the thought. Eight men, all friends of his, more than sixty floors off the ground when the tower collapsed. It was unimaginable. “Most of the unit's missing, but we just found Jake Bryan near the station's rig on West Street. He was alone, so



we're not sure what happened to the others.”

“I’ve got hundreds of people calling. Keep us posted as soon as you hear anything.”

“Will do. Hey, in the meantime do me a favor.”

“Anything.” The dispatcher was quick to answer.

“Look up Jake Bryan’s file and add his wife to your list of calls.” Hisel thought about that for a minute. “In fact, call her first. She needs to get to the hospital.”

“I’ll do it right now.”

Hisel could hear a smile in the man’s voice. There’d been precious few bits of good news that morning. This was one of them. And as they hung up, a single ray of light shone through the shadowy cloud of smoke and ash and devastating loss that darkened most of Manhattan. Because in a few minutes, Jamie Bryan would know the truth.

That though the world had been hit hard that day, her part of it was still intact.

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The sirens rang out in the deepest area of his brain. He opened his eyes wide and looked around. He was in a vehicle of some kind, traveling very fast, and next to him was a man in a uniform.

“JB, can you hear me? How’re you feeling?” The man leaned closer and looked hard at one of his eyes and then the other. “Looks like you got banged up pretty good.”

He blinked.

*JB? Who’s JB? And where am I?* He wondered why was he in the fast car and who was the man next to him? He closed his eyes again and tried to remember.

“Jake, we’re in an ambulance. We’re getting you to the hospital.” The man’s voice was kind, but urgent. “Hang in there, buddy.”

Panic punched him in the gut, and he opened his eyes. Who was Jake, and why did the man beside him think they were friends? He tried to sit up,

but a sharp pain sliced through his head and he cried out.

“Take it easy, JB. Relax. Everything's gonna be okay.”

He let his head fall back against the stretcher. At almost the same time, the car stopped and the doors flew open. Suddenly, a blur of people surrounded him, carrying him from the vehicle toward what looked like a hospital.

A hundred questions came to mind, but he couldn't make his mouth form a single word. The moment they entered the building, a nurse came up alongside his stretcher and took his hand.

“Jake ... we're so glad you made it.” Her expression changed, but she kept up with the stretcher as the men from the ambulance moved him down a hallway. “What about Larry? Did he leave the building with you?”

What was she talking about? What building? He'd been in a car, not a building. He tried to open his mouth, but his face was in too much pain. Finally he forced his lips to work, ignoring the searing feeling tearing at his cheeks. “Who ... who's Larry?”

The men carried the stretcher into a large room where more people were waiting, but the nurse stayed at his side. “Larry Henning. He works Engine 57 with you.”

“Engine ... what?” The room was growing blurred, and he had trouble making out the faces around him. The skin on his face hurt so bad he wanted to scream, but he couldn't work his mouth, and nothing made sense. Was he dreaming? Or had he merely woken in a world he knew nothing about? His words were barely audible, and he could feel his strength draining. “I ... I don't know what ... I don't know.”

Alarm filled the nurse's face, and she gripped his hand tighter than before. “I'll be right back.” She left, and almost immediately she returned with a man in a white coat. “This is Dr. Adam Sonney. You've met him before. Do you remember him, Jake?”

He squinted, trying to make out the details of the doctor's face. His head throbbed in a way that coursed through his entire body. All he wanted

was sleep. He winced as he opened his mouth again. “N—n—no.”

The nurse whispered something to the doctor, and the man muffled an answer. From his place on the stretcher, he caught none of what they said, but he noticed that the nurse had tears in her eyes. A piercing pain tore at him from somewhere near his left foot.

Dr. Sonney approached him and bent over, so his face was inches away. “Jake, do you know where you are?”

Why wouldn't they leave him alone? And why did they keep calling him Jake? “My head ...”

“You're at the hospital, Jake. We're going to run some tests and get you fixed up, okay? After that we'll call your wife.”

The pain was getting worse, and his vision was fading. The doctor's words were breaking up, so he only caught every other word. Something about calling a wife, but that was impossible. He wasn't married. At least not that he knew about. He felt sick to his stomach, and he shut out the doctor's voice. Why was everyone trying to confuse him? “My head ...”

This time the doctor sounded like he was talking through a megaphone. His words were loud and blurred together. “You've had a head injury, Jake. Let's take a look at it and see what we can do.”

“Jake?” The nurse's face appeared again. “I'll call Jamie for you, okay?”

He rolled his head from one side to the other. He wanted to yank it from his shoulders and shake it until the pain went away. On the other side of him, someone jabbed him with a needle, and he winced. Almost immediately warmth began spreading across his body, taking the edge off his pain.

“Can you hear me, Jake?”

He was fading fast, but he had one final question that needed to be asked before another minute went by. His eyelids were heavy, but he blinked them open and searched the faces near him until he found the nurse. “Who ... who's Jake?”

The woman looked alarmed. "Don't you know who you are?"

The nurse started to say something else, but it was too late. The warm feeling had spread to his brain, and he could do nothing but go with it. He had no idea why people were calling him Jake, but the nurse's last question was the most frightening of all.

If he wasn't Jake, then who was he?

Despite the speed with which he was going under, he was able to concentrate enough to consider the question. And worse, the fact that he had no answer for himself. It was one thing to not know the people at the hospital or the names they were throwing at him. But he didn't know his own name. In fact, he couldn't remember a single thing about who he was or what he did for a living, or why he'd been brought to this hospital with a head injury.

His eyes closed. Next to him he could hear several voices, but they all blended together, and gradually the sound grew quieter. Then, out of the recesses of his mind, a name suddenly came to him. The only name that meant anything at all. He opened his mouth and used all his remaining energy to say it.

"S ... Sierra ..."

He heard the word and felt some sense of order return. The vision of a beautiful little girl flashed in his heart, and he was certain this time. Whoever she was, he'd known her before this moment, so he said it again. "Sierra!"

The pain was gone, and he felt himself being sucked into the deepest sleep he'd ever known. He wanted to say her name one more time, but he couldn't make his mouth and brain cooperate. The last thought that filled his head before he blacked out was this: Somehow a little girl named Sierra would be part of the puzzle whenever he woke up. And maybe she could help him answer the questions.

Who was Larry and what was Engine 57? Who was he married to and for how long, and how come he couldn't remember a thing about her? And,

of course, the biggest question of all.

Who in the world was he?

## Dertien

11 September 2001 10:33

Daar hang nog 'n digte stof oor die strate, maar kaptein Aaron Hisel gee nie om nie. Hy is twee-en-vyftig, 'n veteraan met ligte asma, maar hy is vasbeslote om terug te gaan, al kos dit hom sy lewe. Niemand weet hoeveel brandweermanne en burgerlikes onder die puin vasgekeer lê nie. Die meeste van hulle sal dood wees, maar hoe verskriklik die ineenstorting ook al was, dis moontlik dat iemand oorleef het. Elke sekonde tel, en hy is desperaat om op die plek te kom waar die World Trade Center – skaars 'n uur tevore – gestaan het. Die afgelope sestig minute was soos 'n opeenvolging van afskuwelike nagmerries. Asof so iets onmoontlik in die regte lewe sou kon gebeur.

By hulle aankoms op die toneel het Hisel en die manne van Leer 96 tot by die twaalfde verdieping gevorder toe hulle 'n groep gewondes alleen in 'n kantoor aangetref het.

Die brandweermanne het die werknemers op hulle rûe gelaai, ondertoe gedra en tot by 'n wagtende bus 'n halwe blok van die World Trade Center af gehelp. Hulle was besig om die mense in die voertuig te laai toe die suidelike toring neerstort.

“Hardloop!” het Hisel gegil en die hele groep het in 'n nabygeleë kafee skuiling gevind.

“Ons manne is in daai gebou!” het een van die mans gegil toe hulle onder die tafels platgeval het. “Die hele eenheid!”

Die oorverdowende gedreun het in Hisel se binneste weergalm. Toe dit uiteindelik stil raak, het hy begin koppe tel. Al die mans van Leer 96 was daar. Hulle hulp aan die beseerde werknemers het hulle lewe gered.

“Nou goed,” het Hisel vir die mans gesê. “Kom ons gaan soek ons manne.”

Met 'n stuk van sy hemp oor sy mond het hy in die rigting van die suidelike toring begin draf. Maar die chaos op straat het hulle vordering belemmer. Dit het hulle twintig minute geneem om West Street te bereik, net betyds om die waarskuwing te hoor.

Die noordelike toring het begin val!

Hisel en die res van Leer 96 moes weer vir hulle lewe vlug, en hierdie keer het hulle in 'n klein bloemistewinkel 'n blok daarvandaan skuiling gevind. Minute later het die grond onder hulle gebewe en het hulle dieselfde verskriklike, onvergeetlike gedruis gehoor. Die meesleurende krag wat op die ineenstorting van die noordelike toring volg, is groter as enigiets wat Hisel al gesien het. Dit herinner hom aan beeldmateriaal wat hy van Orkaan Andrew

gesien het. Maar dit wat vandag hier gebeur, is erger, meer soos 'n atoombom wat brokke sement, glasskerwe, stukke van mure en motors deur die lug slinger. Selfs hier in die winkel het die slag sy mans se voete onder hulle uitgeslaan.

In een stadium het 'n liggaam verby hulle deur die lug getrek.

Uiteindelik het die stof effens opgeklaar en kan hulle net-net oor die straat sien. Nadat Hisel weer seker gemaak het dat al sy mans daar is, beveel hy hulle om in pare te verdeel.

“'n Mens kan min genoeg sien om te verdwaal.” Hisel is nie so luidrugtig en uitgesproke soos Maxwell nie, maar nou praat hy in 'n besliste stem. Hy hoës twee maal. “Die terrein gaan onstabiel wees, met holtes onder die oppervlak, sommige tot tien meter diep, selfs meer. En onthou, die brandstof het nog nie uitgebrand nie.”

Hisel hoef hulle nie op die ooglopende te wys nie. Die dodetal onder die brandweermanne gaan katastrofaal wees. Hulle begin weer met hulle terugtog na West Street waar hulle hul waens skaars 'n uur tevore parkeer het. Hisel probeer om nie deur die rook na die onwerklike leemte in die lug te kyk waar die torings eens gestaan het nie. Hy hou sy oë eerder op die grond en lei sy mans deur 'n doolhof van puin en verwoeste voertuie. 'n Dik laag gryswit, slikagtige as het oor alles, insluitend liggaamsdele, gaan lê. As Maxwell en die manne van Enjin 57 nog lewe, sal dit 'n wonderwerk wees.

Uiteindelik bereik hulle die voet van 'n berg puin. Ondanks die digte newels en die motorwrakke wat rondom hulle lê, bestaan daar by Hisel geen twyfel nie: Die hoop gebreekte sement en glas en vergruisde staal is al wat van die suidelike toring oorgebly het. Hy beveel die mans om twee-twee uit te beweeg.

“Onthou wat ek gesê het.” Hy kyk na hulle en hoës weer. “Wees versigtig. Hou 'n oog oor mekaar. Ons moet ingaan, ons manne kry en by die stasie kom. Ek wil weet waar elke man is.”

Hulle gaan uiteen en Hisel dink aan sy woorde. Maak nie saak wat hy voor hom sien nie, hy moet glo, moet hoop. Hy knik na een van die stasiejuniors, Joe Landers, en hulle begin haastig in West Street afstap. “Ek wil by die brandweerwaens uitkom.” Hisel hoës. “Net ingeval een van die mans dit tot daar gemaak het.”

Landers knik en hou sy oë op die grond.

Hisel se hoësery vererger. Die rook brand sy longe en sy mond proe na as. Hy gaan staan en buk vooroor om sy asem terug te kry. As hy nie 'n manier kry om die lug te filtreer nie, sal hy moet teruggaan.

“Is Kaptein oukei?” Landers hou sy hemp oor sy mond.

“Ja.” Hy hoës weer, hierdie keer totdat dit voel of die bloed na sy gesig stroom. “Net stadig.”

Waarom het hy sy mond nie vroeër bedek nie? Hy skeur sy hemp oop, trek die wit T-hemp oor sy ken en druk dit oor sy neus en mond. Toe hy uiteindelik sy asem terugkry, vorder hulle vinniger.

Hulle loop deur die digte dynserigheid. Brandweerwaens – die meeste van hulle afgeskryf – staan aan weerskante van die straat. Maar nie een van die waens behoort aan Enjin 57 of Leer 96 nie. Hulle loop verder en dan, 'n entjie voor hulle, kan Hisel twee waens uitmaak. Die een is halfopgefrommel, maar die ander een ... die ander een staan nog. “Daai twee is ons s'n, nè?” Hy loop vinniger.

“Ja.” Landers sorg dat hy byhou, sy stem opgewonde. “Dit lyk so.”

Hisel het sy asem ingetrek om te roep, te kyk of iemand hom kan hoor toe hy iets onder een van die waens sien beweeg, die een wat nie so erg beskadig is nie.

“Het Kaptein gesien?” Landers steek vas en staar na die plek waar daar 'n beweging was.

Hulle is nog amper dertig meter weg toe 'n man homself onder die wa uitsleep en sukkelend op sy knieë kom.

Hisel en Landers hardloop nader, desperaat om die man se gesig uit te maak. Vyf meter van hom af kom Hisel tot stilstand. “Jake Bryan?” Die kaptein gooi sy kop terug en gee 'n kreet. “Jake Bryan! Ja! Jy het dit gemaak!”

Jake knip sy oë en wieg effens. Hy is toe onder die as, sy kop bloei en die grootste deel van sy gesig is vol skrape en lelik gebrand. Sy skoene is weg en Hisel het geen idee waar sy uniform is nie, maar hy is seker dat dit Jake is.

“Hei, JB!” Landers is eerste by hom. “Waar is die ander?”

“Wat ...” Jake se oë lyk halfdeurmekaar. Hy sukkel om regop te bly en Hisel gryp hom aan die arm.

“Stadig nou, JB ... vat dit stadig.”

Jake begin opstaan, maar toe hy sy tweede voet wil neersit, swik sy knieë en gee sy bene in. Hisel laat sak hom op die grond en plaas sy vingers op Jake se gewrig. Sy polsslag is swak en vinnig. “Hy het hulp nodig.”

“Dit lyk na 'n hoofbesering.” Landers buk oor Jake.

“Onder andere.” Hisel wys na die brandweerwa. “Gaan kyk of daar nog iemand onder die wa is, of in die kajuit. Ons kort nog steeds agt mans.”

Landers draf na die brandweerwa terwyl Hisel JB se ooglede oplig en hulle ondersoek. Sy pupille lyk dieselfde, maar is heeltemal te groot, selfs in die digte rook. “Kan jy my hoor, Jake?”

JB beweeg nie. Hy is bewusteloos. En afhangende van sy beserings, gaan hulle hom verloor as hulle nie vinnig hulp kry nie.

Landers kom terug en ontmoet Hisel se oë. “Daar is niemand nie, Kaptein. Nie een van die ander nie.” Hy is uitasem toe hy vinnig na JB kyk. “Hoe gaan dit met hom?”

“Nie goed nie. Help my.” Hisel en Landers hurk aan weerskante van Jake, neem mekaar se arms onder sy nek en knieë en tel hom op in 'n sittende posisie.

Met sy los hand hou Hisel sy T-hemp voor sy gesig. Hy hoes net twee keer terwyl hulle moeisaam straataf beweeg en uiteindelik by 'n wagtende ambulans uitkom. Twee paramedici sien hulle aankom en kry 'n draagbaar

gereed.

“Waar het julle hom gekry?” vra een van hulle terwyl hy Hisel en Landers help om JB op die draagbaar neer te lê.

“Hy’s ’n brandweerman. Jake Bryan van Enjin 57.” Hisel se lange wil bars, maar hy het nog nooit so goed gevoel nie. As Jake dadelik hulp kry, sal hy dit maak. Hisel is seker daarvan.

Met kundige vaardigheid gespe die paramedikus JB aan die draagbaar vas en koppel hom aan ’n drup. “Ek ken JB. Ons het al baie saamgewerk.” Die man kyk op en ontmoet Hisel se oë. “Waar is sy skofmaat, Larry?”

“Ons weet nie. Die res van die manne van Enjin 57 is ...” Hisel druk sy hande in sy sakke toe dit hom tref. As die ouens wat hy uitgestuur het, nie die vermiste mans kry nie, is dit moontlik dat hulle almal dood is. Agt brandweermanne van een stasie. Nog meer ontstellend is die feit dat elke ander stasie in Manhattan soortgelyke verliese sal ly. Die omvang van die brandweer se verlies is iets waaraan Hisel nie nou kan dink nie. Hy maak keel skoon, maar sy woorde wil nie kom nie.

Landers staan nader en voltooi die sin. “Die res van die mans word vermis. Ons het spanne wat na hulle soek. Dis hoe ons JB gekry het.”

Die paramedici is besig om Jake in die wagtende ambulans te laai. Een klim saam met JB agter in, en nadat die ander een die deur toegemaak het, skuif hy agter die stuur in. “Hy sal by die Mount Sinai Medical Center wees,” sê die bestuurder toe hy sy deur toemaak. “Iemand moet sy vrou bel.”

Hisel en Landers kyk hoe die ambulans met ’n loeiende sirene wegtrek. Toe die voertuig ’n entjie weg is, trek Landers sy asem in. “Het Kaptein al Jake se vrou ontmoet?”

“Jamie?” Hisel se stem is gesmoord. Die dag se gebeure is besig om hom in te haal, en ’n koue wind waai deur sy binneste. Hy is nie iemand wat maklik huil of sommer aan sy emosies uiting gee nie. Maar waar hy nou in die as van die World Trade Center staan en deur die verlies van honderde brandweermanne getref word, het Hisel ’n intense begeerte om van alles af weg te loop en te huil. Dis vanselfsprekend onmoontlik; die reddingswerk is nog nie naastenby verby nie. Hy laat sy asem stadig uit en kry sy emosies onder beheer. “Ja, ek het.”

“Nou ja ...” Vir ’n oomblik lyk dit of Landers ook wil huil. Maar hy trek sy asem skerp in en skud sy kop toe hy teen die bakwerk van een van die ambulanse klop. “Vanaand, wanneer ek nie kan slaap nie oor al die mense wat ons hier verloor het, gaan ek aan Jamie Bryan dink. Ons gaan baie vroue moet bel en sê dat hulle mans vermis word. Maar Jamie sal nie een van hulle wees nie.”

Landers is reg. Hoofkwartier moet onmiddellik gekontak word. Daar is ongetwyfeld honderde mense wat koorsagtig probeer uitvind wie oorleef het en wie vermis word. Hy haal sy radio uit sy rugsak en pons ’n nommer in. “Dit is kaptein Aaron Hisel van Leer 96. My eenheid is voltallig, en ons is tans besig om na oorlewendes te soek.” Hy aarsel. “Hulle vroue moet



asseblief gekontak en laat weet word.”

Daar is ’n gesuis aan die ander kant en Hisel moet sy hand oor sy ander oor hou om die versendingsbeampte te hoor. “Ek’s jammer. Ek het nie gehoor nie.”

“Ons sal hulle bel.” Hierdie keer is die woorde duideliker. “Wat van Enjin 57? Die eenheid is na die een-en-sestigste vloer van die suidelike toring uitgestuur, nè?”

“Ja.” Hisel voel naar. Agt mans, almal sy vriende, was meer as sestig vloere van die grond af toe die toring neergestort het. Dis ondenkbaar. “Die meeste van die ouens word vermis, maar ons het Jake Bryan sopas by ons brandweerwa in West Street gekry. Hy was alleen, en ons is nie seker wat met die ander ouens gebeur het nie.”

“Hier is honderde mense wat bel. Laat my weet as julle enigiets hoor.”

“Maak so. Nog iets, sal jy my ’n guns doen?”

“Enigiets,” antwoord die man dadelik.

“Trek Jake Bryan se lêer en sorg dat iemand sy vrou bel.” Hisel dink ’n oomblik. “Trouens, bel haar eerste. Sy moet by die hospitaal kom.”

“Ek bel haar nou dadelik.”

Hisel kan die man hoor glimlag. Daar was vanoggend bitter min goeie nuus, en hy het nou die geleentheid om een so ’n brokkie oor te dra. Toe hulle groet, breek daar vir hom ’n enkele ligstraal deur die digte rook en as en vernietiging wat die grootste deel van Manhattan verdonker. Want oor ’n paar minute gaan Jamie Bryan nuus kry.

Dat alhoewel die wêreld vandag swaar getref is, haar deeltjie daarvan behoue gebly het.

Die sirenes loei iewers diep in sy kop. Hy maak sy oë groot oop en kyk om hom rond. Hy is in ’n vinnig bewegende voertuig en langs hom is ’n man in ’n uniform.

“JB, kan jy my hoor? Hoe voel jy?” Die man leun oor hom en kyk stip in sy een oog, dan die ander. “Jy het sleg deurgeloop, ou vriend.”

Hy knip sy oë.

*JB? Wie’s JB? En waar is ek?* Waarom is hy in die vinnige voertuig en wie is die man langs hom? Hy maak sy oë weer toe en probeer onthou.

“Jake, ons is in ’n ambulans. Ons is op pad hospitaal toe.” Die man se stem is vriendelik maar dringend. “Vasbyt, my vriend.”

’n Paniekerigheid wil hom oorweldig en hy maak sy oë weer oop. Wie is Jake, en waarom dink die man langs hom hulle is vriende? Hy probeer regop sit, maar ’n skerp pyn skiet deur sy kop en hy kreun.

“Dis oukei, JB. Ontspan. Ons is nou daar.”

Hy het sy kop net weer op die draagbaar laat sak toe die ambulans tot stilstand kom en die deure oopvlieg. Skielik is daar ’n klomp mense rondom hom en word hy uitgelaai en na ’n gebou gedra.

Honderde vrae borrel na die oppervlak, maar hy kry nie ’n enkele woord in sy mond gevorm nie. Die oomblik toe hulle in die gebou is, kom loop ’n suster

langs die draagbaar en neem sy hand.

“Jake ... ons is so bly jy het dit gemaak.” Haar uitdrukking verander, maar sy hou by die draagbaar terwyl die ambulansmanne haastig met hom in ’n gang afloop. “Wat van Larry? Het hy saam met jou uit die gebou gekom?”

Waarvan praat sy? Watse gebou? Hy was in ’n kar, nie ’n gebou nie. Hy probeer sy mond oopmaak, maar sy gesig is te seer. Uiteindelik dwing hy die woorde oor sy lippe en probeer die pyn ignoreer wat deur sy wange skroei. “Wie’s ... wie’s Larry?”

Die mans neem hom na ’n groot kamer waar nog mense wag, maar die verpleegster bly by hom. “Larry Henning. Hy werk saam met jou op Enjin 57.”

“Enjin ... wat?” Dit raak wasig voor hom en hy sukkel om die gesigte om hom te onderskei. Sy gesig is so seer hy wil gil, maar sy mond wil nie werk nie en niks maak sin nie. Droom hy? Of het hy in ’n wêreld wakker geword waarvan hy niks weet nie? Sy woorde is skaars hoorbaar en hy kan voel hoe hy swakker word. “Ek ... ek weet nie wat ... ek weet nie.”

Die verpleegster se gesig verstrak en sy hou sy hand stywer vas. “Ek’s nou weer terug.” Sy loop en verskyn amper dadelik met ’n man in ’n wit jas. “Dis dr. Adam Sonney. Jy het hom al ontmoet. Onthou jy hom, Jake?”

Hy skreef sy oë en probeer die dokter se gelaatstrekke uitmaak. Sy kop klop met pynlike slae wat deur sy hele liggaam sidder. As hy maar net kan slaap. Hy kreun toe hy sy mond weer oopmaak. “N-n-nee.”

Die verpleegster fluister iets vir die dokter, en die man antwoord gedemp. Van waar hy op die draagbaar lê, kan hy nie hoor wat hulle sê nie, maar daar is trane in die verpleegster se oë. Iewers naby sy linkervoet is daar ’n skerp skietpyn.

Dr. Sonney kom nader en buk sodat sy gesig net sentimeters van hom af is. “Jake, weet jy waar jy is?”

Hoekom los hulle hom nie uit nie? En hoekom hou hulle aan om hom Jake te noem? “My kop ... ”

“Jy’s in die hospitaal, Jake. Ons gaan ’n paar toetse doen en jou iets gee om beter te voel, oukei? Daarna sal ons jou vrou bel.”

Die pyn raak erger en hy sukkel om te fokus. Die dokter praat, maar hy hoor net elke tweede woord. Iets van sy vrou bel, maar dis onmoontlik. Hy is nie getroud nie. Nie waarvan hy weet nie, altans. Hy voel naar en probeer die dokter se stem uitdoof. Hoekom probeer almal hom deurmekaar maak? “My kop ... ”

Hierdie keer klink dit asof die dokter deur ’n megafoon praat. Sy woorde is hard en raak deurmekaar. “Jy het ’n hoofbesering opgedoen, Jake. Ek wil daarna laat kyk sodat ons weet wat om te doen.”

“Jake?” Die verpleegster se gesig verskyn weer. “Ek gaan Jamie vir jou bel.”

Hy beweeg sy kop heen en weer. Hy wil dit van sy nek afpluk en skud totdat die pyn weggaan. Aan die ander kant van sy bed steek iemand ’n naald in sy arm en hy kreun. Oomblikke later voel hy hoe ’n warmte deur hom versprei

en vervaag die pyn.

“Kan jy my hoor, Jake?”

Hy raak vinnig weg, maar daar is nog een ding wat hy moet vra voordat hy aan die slaap raak. Sy ooglede is swaar, maar hy dwing hulle oop en soek totdat hy die verpleegster se gesig kry. “Wie ... wie’s Jake?”

Die vrou lyk verskrik. “Weet jy nie wie jy is nie?”

Die verpleegster begin nog iets sê, maar dis te laat. Die warmte het na sy kop versprei en hy kan nie anders as homself daaraan oor te gee nie. Hy weet nie waarom hulle hom Jake noem nie, maar die verpleegster se laaste vraag laat hom ys.

As hy nie Jake is nie, wie is hy dan?

In die vlietende sekondes voor hy wegraak, flits die vraag deur sy kop. Ook die verskriklike besef dat hy nie vir hom ’n antwoord kan gee nie. Dis erg genoeg om nie die mense by die hospitaal te ken nie. Maar hy weet nie eens wat sy eie naam is nie. Trouens, hy het nie die vaagste benul wie hy is, watter werk hy doen of waarom hy met ’n hoofbesering na hierdie hospitaal toe gebring is nie.

Sy oë gaan toe. Langs hom begin die verskillende stemme inmekaarvloei en word dit geleidelik stiller. Toe is dit asof daar onverwags ’n naam deur die oppervlak breek. Die enigste naam wat iets beteken. Hy maak sy mond oop en span sy laaste krag in om dit te sê.

“S-Sierra ... ”

Hy hoor die woord en vir die eerste keer ervaar hy ’n mate van orde. Die beeld van ’n pragtige klein dogtertjie flits deur sy kop en hierdie keer is hy seker. Wie sy ook al is, hy ken haar naam. Hy sê dit weer: “Sierra!”

Die pyn is weg en hy voel hoe hy in ’n baie diep slaap wegsak. Hy wil haar naam nog een keer sê, maar sy mond en kop wil nie meer saamwerk nie. Sy laaste gedagte is dat ’n klein dogtertjie met die naam Sierra een van die stukkies in sy legkaart is. En dat sy hom dalk kan help om die baie vrae te beantwoord.

Wie is Larry en wat is Enjin 57? Met wie is hy getroud en hoe lank al, en hoekom kan hy niks van haar onthou nie? En dan die heel grootste vraag.

Wie is hy?

# Chapter FOURTEEN

SEPTEMBER 11, 2001, 11:04 A.M.

For thirty-six minutes, Jamie held the receiver in her hand and stared at it.

During that time she did nothing but remind herself to breathe and will someone to call about Jake. So when the machine finally broke the silence and rang, she dropped the phone and nearly fell out of her chair in her scramble to grab it off the floor and click the talk button.

“Hello? Who is this?”

“Sergeant Riker at the FDNY. Is this Jamie Bryan?”

“Yes.” Her face felt cool and clammy against her fingers. She was certain she was floating, because she had no connection whatsoever to the woman sitting in her kitchen waiting to hear news that would change her life forever. She squeezed the phone and ordered herself to sound normal. “This is her.”

“Mrs. Bryan, your husband's been found alive. He's—”

“Jake!” Jamie let the receiver fall slowly to her lap as she screamed his name. He was alive! The relief was like a gust of air in a room where she'd been suffocating. Jake hadn't been in the south tower after all, and now he was alive! Just as he'd promised!

Suddenly, she remembered Sergeant Riker, and she jerked the phone back to her ear. “I'm sorry, I ... I missed that last part.”

The man hesitated. “I was saying he's been injured, Mrs. Bryan. He's at Mount Sinai Medical Center being treated. I promised I'd call you.”

In a rush, the oxygen left the room once more, and a paralyzing fear returned to Jamie's voice. “How ... how hurt is he?”

“Actually, the doctors will have to tell you that, Mrs.—”

“I don't want to talk to doctors, Sergeant!” Jamie was shouting now, on her feet and pacing the kitchen. “You must've gotten some kind of

report. Please ...” She forced herself to calm down. “Please tell me what you know.”

Again the man paused, and for a brief instant Jamie felt for him. How many of these phone calls had he been asked to make this morning? “Captain Hisel made the report. He said your husband had burns and a head injury. But he thought he’d make it.”

The relief offered only enough room to breathe. If Jake had a head injury, anything was possible. She needed to get to the hospital right away, be with him, talk to him. Assure him that everything was being done to get him better.

“Thank you, Sergeant. That means a lot.” She was about to hang up when she remembered Sue’s request. That Jamie call the moment she heard anything. “What about Larry Henning? Is he with Jake at the hospital?”

“Larry’s part of Engine 57, right?”

“Yes. Same as Jake.”

“No,” the sergeant sighed. “I’m afraid we haven’t heard anything from any of the others.”

The emotional extremes from the past few minutes were taking their toll on Jamie. She dropped to the chair near the phone and hung her head. “Nothing?”

“Mrs. Bryan, your husband was the only one they’ve found from Engine 57.” He paused, and there was something defeated in his tone as well. “They were headed for the sixty-first floor of the south tower when the building collapsed.”

Jamie gripped her stomach and gritted her teeth. The whole day had been nothing but a series of nightmares. The only reason she had survived at all was the hope that Jake was somehow alive. But now that he ... what would she tell Sue? And how had Jake lived if his entire unit was missing? She found her voice once more. “Th—thank you for calling.”

She hung up and stared at the receiver. She should call Sue. The woman was her friend, and she was probably sitting by the phone the same

way Jamie had been. But what could she say? That Larry was trapped somewhere in the middle of a hundred floors of a collapsed building? That none of the men from Engine 57 had been found except Jake?

They could still find him, after all. There was no point worrying her if the information the sergeant had was wrong. No, the call to Sue could wait. For now she needed to get to the hospital and find Jake. He was hurt and alone, and he needed her by his side. She made a quick call to the neighbor before she left.

“They found him.” Grateful tears spilled from Jamie's eyes, and she sobbed twice before composing herself. “He's ... he's alive.”

“Oh, Jamie, I'm so glad.” The woman's voice was shaky. “Sierra's fine. She's watching a movie with the other kids.” The woman hesitated. “Should I say anything to her?”

“No.” Jamie's answer was quick. “She doesn't know about any of it.” Another jolt of nausea shook her. “Listen, Jake's hurt, but he'll be okay. If you can keep Sierra for a while longer, I'll go see him at the hospital.”

“Take your time. We'll be here.”

Jamie thanked the woman, hung up the phone, and grabbed her keys. Before she left the house, another call came in, this one from the hospital. A nurse confirmed what Sergeant Riker had already said. Jake had a head injury and was unconscious. Jamie should come right down.

“What if the police won't let me on the ferry?”

“They're taking people on a limited basis.” The nurse sounded confident. “Explain the situation. They'll let you on.”

She was right. This time when Jamie pulled up to the ferry docks she had information that convinced the officer to let her aboard. Her firefighter husband was being treated at Mount Sinai Medical Center, and doctors on staff had asked her to come.

Jamie parked, walked aboard, crossed the ferry to the far side, and found a quiet corner near the railing. In a matter of minutes the ferry pushed off, and Jamie could only stare at the Manhattan skyline. It was like

watching the end of the world. The closer she got, the more awful the devastation appeared. The Twin Towers were gone, but the pile of rubble was still sending up clouds of smoke, still glowing red from the flames buried beneath. Other buildings were on fire also, buildings that were part of the World Trade Center. Emergency vehicles were everywhere, and it took Jamie nearly an hour to reach the hospital parking lot by cab. The place was packed, and Jamie wondered how many other hospitals had received victims from the attacks.

She rushed through the doors of the emergency room and made her way through a sea of people. Finally, she found the front desk and gave her name to the woman behind the counter. "I'm here for Jake Bryan. He's my husband."

"Stand over there." The woman had a stack of files on her desk. "Someone will be right with you."

Jamie did as she was told. In less than a minute an older nurse appeared. "Mrs. Bryan?"

Jamie rushed forward. "Yes?"

"This way, please."

"How ... how is he?" Jamie was out of breath and weak at the knees as she walked alongside the woman.

The nurse's tone was businesslike. "Critical but stable at this point." She led them down a hallway into what looked like a makeshift trauma ward. Partitions had been set up dividing rooms and hall space into treatment areas. The nurse kept walking. "The doctor will give you the full report."

Jamie nodded, and suddenly the nurse stopped and directed Jamie into a room on their right. "Here he is. You can stay as long as you like. Talk quietly to him, watch TV, or touch his hands. But if he starts to stir push the call button. We don't want to agitate him. We have him sedated. Any excessive stimulation could cause his brain to swell."

"Okay." Anxiety made Jamie's legs wobbly. Brain swelling? He must

have been hurt worse than she thought. Or maybe it was only a precaution. If Captain Hisel had said he'd be okay, then why were they worried about brain swelling? She entered the room and stopped short, covering her mouth so she wouldn't gasp out loud.

"Jake, honey ... no." Her voice was a whisper, and behind her, the nurse left to give her privacy.

He looked awful.

With the exception of his eyes, Jake's head was wrapped completely in gauze. There were more bandages on both his arms, and a splint along his lower left leg. The rest of him was covered by sheets, so the only part showing at all was his neck and fingers. The simple gold band he'd worn since their wedding date was still on his left hand. But otherwise, he looked nothing like the strong, vibrant man she'd kissed good-bye that morning. Machines were hooked to his mouth and nose; tubes ran into both arms; monitors beeped and whirled.

But Jake didn't move, didn't make a single sound.

She walked to his side and took hold of the bed rail. Her heart raced within her, fast and hard, and she was afraid her movements would wake him, or worse, that her presence would stimulate him and make his brain swell. She swallowed as quietly as she could. *Calm down, Jamie ... calm. He's here ... he's alive. He's not that fragile ... everything's going to be okay.*

She stared at his bandaged face and willed him to breathe, to survive. *Take ... honey. It's me. Her breath hovered in the back of her throat. Don't die, baby ... please.*

Jake lay motionless, and Jamie leaned over the bed rail, studying the subtle rise and fall of his chest. He *was* breathing, wasn't he? He was drawing breath and letting it out again, but she couldn't hear him. The monitors around the bed hummed in a way that seemed louder with every heartbeat. She shot a glance at them and clenched her teeth.



*Be quiet!*

She wanted to hear Jake ... was that too much to ask? Ten seconds of silence so she could hear the slow and gentle inhale, the familiar exhale ... proof that he was really alive beneath all the gauze and bandages. But the machines were constant, relentless. She straightened and studied his chest again.

It was moving. Of course it was moving.

The monitors would scream a warning if he stopped breathing. Jamie took a step backwards and then another, inching toward the chair behind her without ever taking her eyes off Jake. When she reached the chair, she lifted it from its place near the door, brought it silently across the room, and set it next to Jake's bed. When he woke up, she would be there, no matter how long it took. She sat down and took hold of his fingertips. Just the feel of them against the palm of her hand was familiar and intoxicating. Tangible proof that he'd lived, that somehow, somehow, he'd been able to escape the building in its final minutes.

Jamie stared at her husband's fingers and realized the hair had been burned off them. They were scraped and lightly burned, but they were warm and alive. And right now they were all she needed to feel connected with him.

She found the television on the wall above the foot of Jake's bed. The coverage of the disaster that day was not something she wanted to watch. But she needed to know about the rest of Jake's unit. Where were they? Had any firefighters been found alive in the rubble?

On the bedside table was a TV remote. Jamie took it, flicked the power button, and immediately turned down the volume. Live pictures from Manhattan came into focus. Carefully, so Jake wouldn't be disturbed, she made the sound loud enough so she could hear it.

A news anchor was giving a recap of the day's events, and Jamie wondered about her sanity. But somehow, with Jake breathing beside her, she felt strong enough to hear the latest details. The reporter droned on. All

federal office buildings in Washington had been evacuated; another plane, United Flight 93 from Newark—headed possibly for the White House—had crashed in rural Pennsylvania. In all, some three hundred people were feared dead in what was now a total of four hijacked plane crashes.

“In addition, New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani has urged all New Yorkers to stay home and any residents south of Canal Street to evacuate to emergency centers set up by local officials.”

The list of mind-boggling details continued.

The airports in Los Angeles and San Francisco had been shut down, and experts from the Centers of Disease Control and Prevention were sending an emergency response team to New York City as a precautionary move. Only fifty planes remained flying over U.S. airspace, but none were reporting any problems.

When the station ran out of old news, it switched back to live shots of Manhattan and Washington, D.C. Flames could still be seen in both locations, but there wasn't much to say. The terrorists had made a complete and utterly accurate hit.

“Reports coming in show that very few survivors are being found in the rubble of the collapsed Twin Towers, a place law and fire officials are now calling Ground Zero.”

*Ground Zero?* Jamie tightened the grip she had on Jake's fingers. Wasn't that the term used at atomic bomb sites? Jamie stared at the TV and wondered again if the whole crazy day wasn't some type of bad dream. How could terrorists have taken over four passenger planes on the same morning?

She focused once more on the news pouring from the television. *Come on, people, tell me about the firefighters ... where are they? Who's getting them out of the rubble? How many are missing?*

A live shot of President George Bush came into view. Speaking from Barksdale Air Force Base, he explained that the country had been attacked by terrorists. Appropriate security measures were being taken to preclude

any further attacks, and the U.S. military was on high alert worldwide. He asked for prayers for those killed or wounded, and then he bit his lip. For a moment, Jamie thought the president might actually break down.

Instead, he gritted his teeth and said, "Make no mistake ... the United States will hunt down and punish those responsible for these cowardly acts."

The camera cut to a different reporter in a studio. Images from the smoldering pile of rubble took up a portion of the right side of the screen. "The news in from fire officials is grim this afternoon. It is feared now that of the hundreds of firefighters who responded to the disaster at the Twin Towers, nearly two hundred are dead. I repeat, nearly two hundred FDNY firefighters are feared dead at this hour. And there is great concern that the actual number of fatalities within the fire department may be much higher."

They cut to a picture of Deputy Chief Bob Atwell, a man Jamie had spoken with at a department softball game last June. Bob was a clown at FDNY functions, routinely dumping watercoolers down the backs of co-workers and running the bases backwards when he'd hit a ball over the fence.

But now Atwell's eyes were grim, deeply set in an ashen face marked with weariness. "Right now, rescue crews are using search dogs to comb the mountain of debris." He ran the back of his hand over his forehead. "We're making every attempt to locate anyone who survived the collapse of the buildings and get them out of there."

A reporter stood up. "Has your department found anyone yet?"

"A few people." Bob sighed and the muscles in his jaw flexed. "Not nearly the numbers we'd like to be finding at this point."

The reporter was persistent. "How many men are missing?"

"Well ..." Bob pursed his lips and let his gaze fall to the ground for a moment before looking up again. "I can't give you a specific number, but we'd estimate more than three hundred are missing."

"Were they all in the buildings at the time of the collapse?"

Bob sucked in a breath, and Jamie wanted to hug him. The man was kind and patient, but these questions had to be the hardest he'd ever had to answer.

“Most of them were in the south tower. It went first and with virtually no warning. The missing men were either in the tower or on the ground. A smaller number were in or near the north tower, as many of our people had time to evacuate that building in anticipation of a collapse.”

The image changed, and the screen was filled with a live shot of the burning Pentagon. Jamie lifted the remote and clicked off the TV. She couldn't stand to watch another minute. Bob Atwell's words had said it all, really. They'd only found a few firefighters. A few out of more than three hundred who'd gone into the buildings.

Jamie looked at Jake, and she was hit by a mix of emotions greater than anything she'd ever felt. Her husband was alive, and for that she was filled with a breathless relief and gratitude. But how would he take the news when he came to? If eight men from his company were missing, then there was a good chance they were dead. And what about Larry?

Visions of her husband's best friend flooded Jamie's mind. The times when they'd barbecued together or camped upstate. The jet-skiing trip they'd taken just a few days ago. Larry and Jake were inseparable, like brothers. If Larry was dead, how would Jake handle the fact? Would he blame himself for somehow not watching his friend's back better?

And how about Sue?

Jamie tightened the grip she had on Jake's fingers. What kind of friend was she if she didn't make the call? Without giving herself time to change her mind, Jamie picked up the phone on the table beside her and dialed “9” for an outside line. When she had it, she punched in the number for Sue and Larry.

An older woman answered on the second ring. “Hello?” The woman's voice was thick, as if she'd been crying.

“Hi, this is Jamie Bryan. Is Sue there?”

“Hi, Jamie. This is Larry's mother.”

“Oh ... hi.” Jamie let her head fall into her hands. Of course. Larry's mother lived by herself in the Bronx and was constantly at Larry and Sue's house doting on Katy. The woman was probably as desperate about Larry's situation as Sue was. “Have ... have you heard anything?”

“Someone from the department called.” There was a catch in the woman's voice, and she started to cry. “I'm sorry ... I think I'm still in shock.”

“It's okay.” Tears stung Jamie's eyes too. “We're all in shock.”

The older woman sniffed and finished her statement. “The man who called said Larry was missing. Larry and all the men from Engine 57.”

“Not all the men.” Jamie almost hated telling the woman. How fair was it that Jake was alive, lying in a hospital bed beside her while Larry and the rest of the company were buried beneath forty floors of cement and steel? “Jake's alive. I'm with him at the hospital.”

A cry sounded from Larry's mother. “Oh, Jamie, that's wonderful. I'll let Sue know right away.”

“Is ... is she there? I'd like to tell her myself.”

“She's in the bedroom with Katy.” The woman hesitated. “I'll see if she'd like to talk.”

A full minute passed. Jamie forced herself to think of nothing but the way Jake's fingers felt against her own. Finally, someone picked up the phone, and Sue's voice came over the line.

“Hello? Jamie?”

“Oh, Sue ... they've got to find him. They've just got to.”

Both of them were suddenly crying, the sound of their sobs sounding out in muffled bursts across the phone line. When Jamie could finally speak, her voice was high, pinched by the sorrow that had built in her throat. “I'm sorry, Sue. I'm so sorry.”

“They'll find him. I ... I have to believe it.” She took two quick breaths and uttered something that was part laugh, part cry. “Larry's mom

says they found Jake.”

“Yes.” Jamie gripped her temples with her thumb and forefinger. “He was beneath the station rig. He has a head injury and burns. I’m with him at the hospital.”

“Is he going to be okay?” There were still tears in Sue’s voice, but she’d calmed down considerably.

“I think so. The doctor hasn’t been in yet. They’re swamped with victims.”

“It doesn’t make sense, does it?”

Jamie knew instinctively what Sue was talking about. If Jake had been found at ground level, why hadn’t Larry been with him? The two of them never left each other’s sides on a call. “You mean why they weren’t together?”

“Exactly.” Sue exhaled hard. “Did they check under the truck? Inside it? Maybe Larry’s still down there somewhere.”

It was an idea Jamie hadn’t thought of. “You should call Captain Hisel. He’s the one who found Jake.”

“Okay.” For the first time there was a whisper of hope in Sue’s voice. “I’ll do that. If I hear anything, I’ll call you.”

“I’ll be here.” It was a moment when most people would offer to pray, but Jamie couldn’t bring herself to say the words. They both knew she was more skeptic than believer. And after what had happened today, she was afraid to raise Sue’s hopes by offering to do something that couldn’t possibly help. “Don’t give up hope.”

“Okay. And, Jamie, when Jake wakes up, tell him we love him.”

## **Veertien**

11 September 2001 11:04

Jamie sit vir ses-en-dertig minute met die telefoon in haar hand en staar daarna.

Al wat sy in dié tyd doen, is om haarself te dwing om asem te haal en te glo

dat iemand haar met inligting oor Jake sal bel. Toe die telefoon dus wel begin lui, gly dit uit haar hand en val sy amper op die vloer in haar haas om dit op te raap en die groen knoppie te druk.

“Hallo? Wie’s dit?”

“Sersant Riker van die New Yorkse Brandweerdepartement. Is u Jamie Bryan?”

“Ja.” Haar gesig is koud en klam teen haar vingers. Dit voel of sy sweef, want daar is geen band tussen haar en die vrou in haar kombuis wat binne oomblikke iets gaan hoor wat haar lewe vir altyd gaan verander nie. Haar hand verstyf om die telefoon en sy beveel haarself om in ’n normale stem te praat. “Dis ek.”

“Mev. Bryan, ons het jou man opgespoor. Hy lewe en is ...”

“Jake!” Jamie laat die gehoorstuk op haar skoot val en gil sy naam. Hy lewe! Die verligting is soos ’n vars windvlaag in ’n kamer waar sy besig was om te versmoor. Jake was toe nooit in die suidelike toring nie, en hy lewe! Nes hy belooft het!

Skielik onthou sy van sersant Riker en sy druk die telefoon weer teen haar oor. “Ek’s jammer. Ek ... ek het die laaste deel gemis.”

Die man aarsel. “Ek het gesê dat hy beseer is, mev. Bryan. Hy word in die Mount Sinai Medical Center behandel. Ek het belowe dat ek sou bel.”

Dis asof die suurstof opnuut uit haar longe gepers word en ’n verlamme vrees neem van haar besit. “Hoe ... hoe seer het hy gekry?”

“Die dokters sal dit vir u kan sê, Mevrouw ...”

“Ek wil nie met dokters praat nie, Sersant!” gil Jamie in die telefoon. Sy het opgestaan en loop op en af in die kombuis. “Julle moes tog een of ander verslag gekry het. Asseblief ...” Sy forseer haarself om kalm te word. “Vertel my asseblief wat u weet.”

Die man huiwer, en vir ’n kort oomblik voel Jamie jammer vir hom. Hoeveel van hierdie soort oproepe het hy al vanoggend gemaak? “Kaptein Hisel het die verslag ingedien. Hy sê jou man het brandwonde en ’n hoofbesering opgedoen. Maar die kaptein glo hy sal dit maak.”

Sy woorde bring net genoeg verligting om asem te haal. Met ’n hoofbesering is enigiets moontlik. Sy moet dadelik by die hospitaal kom, by hom wees, met hom praat. Hom gerusstel dat die dokters alles doen om hom beter te maak.

“Dankie, Sersant. Dit beteken baie.” Sy wil net aflui toe sy van Sue se versoek onthou. Dat Jamie haar sal bel sodra sy enigiets hoor. “Wat van Larry Henning? Is hy saam met Jake in die hospitaal?”

“Larry is deel van Enjin 57, nè?”

“Ja. Saam met Jake.”

“Nee,” sug die man. “Ek’s bevrees ons het nog niks van die ander gehoor nie.”

Die emosionele uiterstes van die laaste paar minute is besig om hulle tol te eis. Jamie sak op die stoel by die telefoon neer en laat haar kop sak. “Niks nie?”

“Mev. Bryan, u man is die enigste een wat hulle kon opspoor.” Hy bly stil en daar is ’n verslaenheid in sy stem toe hy weer praat. “Hulle was op die een-en-sestigste vloer van die suidelike toring toe die gebou neergestort het.”

Jamie byt op haar tande. Die hele dag was tot dusver ’n reeks nagmerries. Die enigste rede waarom sy oorleef het, is die hoop dat Jake nog lewe. Maar nou dat hy ... wat gaan sy vir Sue sê? En hoe het Jake oorleef as sy hele eenheid vermis word? Sy kry haar stem terug. “D-dankie dat u gebel het.”

Sy lui af en staar na die telefoon. Sy moet vir Sue bel. Die vrou is haar vriendin en nes Jamie sit sy ook die hele oggend by die telefoon en wag. Maar wat kan sy sê? Dat Larry iewers in die middel van die honderd verdiepings se puin vasgekeer is? Dat Jake die enigste een in hulle eenheid is wat opgespoor is?

Daar is in elk geval ’n kans dat hulle hom nog kan kry. Dis sinneloos om haar te ontstel as die sersant se inligting dalk verkeerd is. Nee, die oproep kan wag. Nou moet sy eers by die hospitaal kom en by Jake wees. Hy het pyn en is alleen; hy het haar nou by hom nodig. Sy maak ’n vinnige oproep na die buurvrou voordat sy ry.

“Hulle het hom gekry.” Trane van dankbaarheid loop oor Jamie se wange en sy snik twee maal voordat sy haar selfbeheersing herwin. “Hy ... hy lewe.”

“Ag, Jamie, ek’s so bly.” Die vrou se stem is bewerig. “Sierra kuier lekker. Sy kyk ’n fliek saam met die ander kinders.” Die vrou aarsel. “Moet ek enigiets vir haar sê?”

“Nee,” antwoord Jamie vinnig. “Sy weet niks nie.” Nog ’n laag naarheid tref haar. “Hulle sê Jake het seergekry, maar hy is oukei. As jy Sierra nog ’n rukkie by jou kan hou, kan ek gou hospitaal toe ry en kyk of ek hom kan sien.”

“Moenie jaag nie. Ons gaan die hele dag net by die huis wees.”

Jamie sê dankie, lui af en gryp haar sleutels. Sy is net by die deur toe die telefoon weer lui. Hierdie keer is dit ’n verpleegster wat bevestig wat sersant Riker reeds gesê het. Jake het ’n hoofbesering opgedoen en is bewusteloos. Jamie moet dadelik kom.

“Sê nou die polisie wil my nie aan boord laat nie?”

“Hulle vat mense op ’n beperkte basis.” Die verpleegster klink selfversekerd. “Verduidelik die situasie. Hulle sal jou deurbring.”

Sy is reg. Toe Jamie hierdie keer by die dok aankom, oortuig haar inligting die polisieman om haar aan boord te neem. Haar man is ’n brandweerman wat in die Mount Sinai Medical Center behandel word, en die dokter aan diens het haar ontbied.

Jamie parkeer, gaan aan boord en kry ’n stil plekkie teen die reling. Tydens die rit bly Jamie se oë op die stadsilhoeë vasgemaak. Dis soos om die einde van die wêreld te sien afspeel. Hoe nader hulle kom, hoe dieper kom sy onder die indruk van die verwoesting. Die Twin Towers is weg, maar die rook hang swaar bokant die toneel, en die rooi gloed getuig van vlamme wat steeds binne-in die puin vasgekeer is. Van die omliggende geboue is ook in ligte



laaie, geboue wat deel van die World Trade Center is. Die stad wemel van noodvoertuie en dit neem Jamie amper 'n uur om met 'n taxi by die hospitaal uit te kom. Die parkeerterrein is gepak en Jamie wonder in hoeveel van die ander hospitale daar ook slagoffers lê.

Sy haas haar na ongevalle en daar moet sy deur 'n see mense vleg. Uiteindelik bereik sy die ontvangstoonbank en gee haar naam aan 'n vrou wat daar aan diens is. "Ek het Jake Bryan kom sien. Hy is my man."

"As u net 'n paar oomblikke sal wag." Die vrou het 'n stapel lêers op haar lessenaar. "Iemand sal nou by u wees."

Sekondes later maak 'n ouer verpleegster haar verskyning. "Mev. Bryan?"

Jamie loop die vrou tegemoet. "Ja?"

"Kom saam met my, asseblief."

"Hoe ... hoe gaan dit met hom?" vra Jamie kortasem terwyl sy met lam knieë langs die vrou loop.

Die verpleegster se stem is saaklik. "In hierdie stadium kritiek maar stabiel." Sy lei haar na 'n area wat soos 'n tydelike traumasaal lyk. Die kamers en gang is in afskortings verdeel waar pasiënte behandel word. Die verpleegster hou aan loop. "Die dokter sal u die volle verslag gee."

Jamie knik en skielik steek die vrou vas en wys na 'n kamer regs van hulle. "Hier is hy. U kan bly solank u wil. Praat saggies met hom, kyk televisie of raak aan sy hande. Maar as hy enigsins reageer, moet u die noodknoppie druk. Ons wil hom nie ontstel nie. Hy is onder sedasie. Enige onnodige stimulasie kan breinswelling veroorsaak."

"Oukei." Jamie se hart begin angstig klop en haar knieë voel bewurig. Breinswelling? Hy moet ernstiger beseer wees as wat sy gedink het. Of dalk is dit net 'n voorsorgmaatreël. Kaptein Hisel het gesê hy gaan oukei wees; waaroor bekommer hulle hulle oor breinswelling? Sy gaan by die kamer in, steek vas en moet haar hand oor haar mond slaan sodat sy nie hardop na haar asem snak nie.

"Jake, liefste ... nee." Haar stem is 'n fluistering, en agter haar draai die verpleegster weg om hulle privaatheid te gee.

Hy lyk verskriklik.

Buiten sy oë is Jake se hele kop in gaas toegedraai. Albei sy arms is verbind en sy linkeronderbeen is gespalk. Verder is dit net sy nek en vingers wat bokant die lakens uitsteek. Die eenvoudige trouing wat hy sedert hulle troudag dra, is steeds aan sy linkerhand. Maar andersins lyk hy glad nie soos die sterk, lewenskragtige man wat sy vanoggend totsiens gesoen het nie. Daar is masjiene aan sy mond en neus gekoppel, buise wat na albei arms loop, en monitors wat piep en raas.

Maar Jake lê sonder om te beweeg, sonder om 'n geluid te maak.

Sy loop na hom toe en laat sak haar hande op die bedreling. Haar hart klop vinnig en swaar, en sy is bang dat haar bewegings hom sal wakker maak, of erger nog, dat haar teenwoordigheid hom sal oorstimuleer en sy brein laat swel. Sy sluk so sag moontlik. *Kalmeer, Jamie ... kalmeer. Hy is hier ... en hy*

*lewe. Hy is sterker as wat hy lyk ... alles gaan regkom.*

Sy staar na sy toegedraaide gesig asof om hom met haar wilskrag sover te kry om asem te haal, om te oorleef. *Jake ... my liefste. Dis ek. Sy voel kortasem. Moenie doodgaan nie, my lief ... asseblief nie.*

Jamie leun oor die reling en bestudeer die subtile deining van sy bors. Dis nie haar verbeelding nie, of hoe? Natuurlik haal hy asem; sy hoor hom net nie. Dis asof die gezoem van die monitors rondom die bed al hoe harder word. Sy gee hulle 'n kyk en byt op haar tande.

*Bly stil!*

As sy Jake maar net kan hoor ... is dit te veel gevra? Tien sekondes se stilte sodat sy die stadige, sagte inaseming, die bekende uitaseming kan hoor ... 'n bewys dat hy onder al die gaas en verbande nog lewe. Maar die masjiene is meedoënloos. Sy kom orent en kyk weer na sy bors.

Weer merk sy die effense deining. Natuurlik haal hy asem.

Die monitors sal waarskuwend begin piep as hy ophou asemhaal. Jamie retireer voetjie vir voetjie na die stoel agter haar sonder om haar oë van Jake weg te neem. Toe sy die stoel naby die deur bereik, tel sy dit saggies op en kom sit dit langs Jake se bed neer. Sy sal daar wees wanneer hy wakker word, maak nie saak hoe lank dit neem nie. Sy gaan sit en hou sy vingerpunte vas. Die gevoel daarvan teen haar handpalm is bekend en gerusstellend. 'n Tasbare bewys dat hy lewe, dat hy op die een of ander manier op die laaste nippertjie uit die gebou ontsnap het.

Jamie staar na haar man se hand en besef dat die hare daarop weggeskroei is. Sy vingers is vol skrape en effens gebrand, maar dis warm. En op die oomblik is dit al wat sy nodig het om naby hom te voel.

'n Televisie is teen die muur bokant die voetenent van Jake se bed gemonteer. Sy is nie lus om na verdere dekking van die ramp te kyk nie, maar sy moet weet wat van die res van Jake se eenheid geword het. Waar is hulle? Is daar van hulle wat lewend in die puin opgespoor is?

Daar is 'n afstandbeheerder op die bedkassie. Jamie skakel die televisie aan en stel die volume dadelik sagter. Tonele van Manhattan verskyn op die skerm. Versigtig, sodat Jake nie gesteur sal word nie, stel sy die klank net hard genoeg om te kan hoor.

'n Verslaggewer is besig om 'n opsomming van die dag se gebeure te gee, en Jamie is nie meer seker of sy nog normaal dink nie. Maar die feit dat Jake langs haar asemhaal, gee haar die krag om na die jongste nuus te luister. Die man se stem dreun voort. Alle staatsgeboue in Washington is ontruim; nog 'n vliegtuig, United vlug 93 van Newark, het in Pennsilvanië neergestort. Daar word berig dat die vliegtuig moontlik na die Withuis op pad was. Daar word aanvaar daar is nou altesaam sowat driehonderd mense in 'n totaal van vier gekaapte vliegtuie dood.

“Verder doen meneer Rudy Giuliani, burgemeester van New York, 'n beroep op alle New Yorkers om tuis te bly. Hy versoek dat alle inwoners suid van Canal Street hulle huise ontruim en by plaaslike reddingsmissies aanmeld.”

Die lys besonderhede is nimmereindigend.

Die lughawens in Los Angeles en San Francisco is gesluit en 'n span kundiges van die sentrum vir die beheer en voorkoming van siekte word as voorsorgmaatreël na New York gestuur. Daar is tans slegs vyftig vliegtuie in die Amerikaanse lugruim, maar nie een van hulle rapporteer enige probleme nie.

Nadat al hierdie inligting deurgegee is, word daar weer na tonele van Manhattan en Washington, D.C., oorgeskakel. Ten spyte van die rook en vlamme wat steeds gesien kan word, is daar nie veel om te sê nie. Die terroriste se aanval was akkuraat en dodelik.

“Tot dusver is daar baie min oorlewendes in die puin van die Twin Towers opgespoor, 'n plek wat nou deur die owerheid en brandweer Ground Zero genoem word.”

*Ground Zero?* Jamie se greep om Jake se vingers verstyf. Dis mos 'n term vir die plek waar 'n atoombom ontplof het? Jamie staar na die televisie en wonder opnuut of die hele aakligheid nie net 'n slegte droom is nie. Hoe kon terroriste daarin slaag om op een dag vier passasiersvliegtuie te kaap?

*Sy bepaal haar aandag weer by die televisie. Kom nou, iemand, wat van die brandweermanne? Waar is hulle? Wie soek na hulle? Hoeveel word vermis?*

'n Regstreekse skoot van president George Bush verskyn op die skerm. Hy verduidelik dat die land deur terroriste aangeval is. Die nodige sekuriteitsmaatreëls word getref om enige verdere aanvalle te voorkom, en die Amerikaanse weermag is wêreldwyd in gereedheid. Hy versoek dat daar vir slagoffers en gewondes gebid sal word, en byt op sy lip. Vir 'n oomblik wonder Jamie of die president gaan begin huil.

Maar toe kners hy op sy tande en sê: “Moenie 'n fout maak nie ... die Verenigde State sal sorg dat dié wat vir hierdie lafhartige terreuraanvalle verantwoordelik is, opgespoor en gestraf word.”

Die kamera sny na 'n verslaggewer in 'n ateljee. Beelde van die smeulende puinhoop verskyn aan die regterkant van die skerm. “Die nuus wat ons van brandweerbeamptes ontvang, is nie goed nie. Daar word gevrees dat uit die honderde brandweermanne wat op die ramp by die Twin Towers gereageer het, amper tweehonderd dood is. Ek herhaal, 'n geskatte tweehonderd van New York se brandweermanne het in die ramp gesterf. En daar word gevrees dat die werklike aantal sterftes in brandweergeledere uiteindelik baie hoër sal wees.”

Hulle skakel oor na die waarnemende brandweerhoof, Bob Atwell. Jamie het verlede Junie by een van die brandweer se satebalwedstryde met hom gesels. Bob is 'n grapkas by sulke funksies, 'n ou wat water agter in sy medewerkers se hemde afgooi en agteruit deur die bowwe hardloop wanneer hy 'n bal oor die heining geslaan het.

Maar nou is Atwell se oë stroef en ingesonke in sy moeë, bleek gesig. “Reddingspanne maak van spoorhonde gebruik om die puin te fynkam.” Hy vee met die agterkant van sy hand oor sy voorkop. “Ons doen alles in ons

vermoë om enige oorlewendes op te spoor en hulle veilig uit te kry.”  
’n Verslaggewer se stem word gehoor. “Het u departement al enigiemand opgespoor?”

“’n Paar mense.” Bob sug en ’n spier in sy wang spring. “Nie naastenby soveel soos ons op hierdie tydstip sou wou vind nie.”

Die verslaggewer gee nie bes nie. “Hoeveel mans word vermis?”

“Wel ... ” Bob trek sy mond op ’n plooi en laat sak sy blik vir ’n oomblik voordat hy weer opkyk. “Ek kan jou nie ’n spesifieke getal gee nie, maar ons skat dat daar meer as driehonderd vermis word.”

“Was hulle almal tydens die ineenstorting in die geboue?”

Bob trek sy asem in, en Jamie wens sy kon hom ’n bietjie vashou. Die man is sagmoedig en geduldig, maar sy is seker dat hy nog nooit sulke moeilike vrae moes beantwoord nie.

“Die meeste van ons manne was in die suidelike toring wat feitlik sonder waarskuwing neergestort het. Die vermiste mans was óf in die toring óf op die grond. ’n Kleiner getal was in of by die noordelike toring, want baie van hulle het genoeg tyd gehad om te ontruim.”

Die beeld verander, en nou is daar ’n skoot van die brandende Pentagon op die skerm. Jamie neem die afstandbeheerder en skakel die televisie af. Sy kan dit nie langer verduur nie. Bob Atwell het in elk geval haar vrae beantwoord. Hulle het net enkele brandweermanne opgespoor. Enkeles uit die meer as driehonderd wat in die geboue was.

Jamie kyk na Jake, en die emosies wat in haar opwel, is groter as enigiets wat sy al ooit ervaar het. Haar man lewe, en dit vul haar met eindelose verligting en dankbaarheid. Maar hoe gaan hy die nuus hanteer wanneer hy bykom? As agt mans uit sy eenheid vermis word, is daar ’n groot kans dat hulle dood is. En wat van Larry?

Beelde van haar man se beste vriend kom by haar op. Die kere toe hulle saam gebräai of gaan kamp het. Vrydag se waterponie-uitstappie. Larry en Jake is onafskeidbaar, soos broers. Hoe gaan Jake dit hanteer as Larry dood is? Gaan hy homself verkwalik omdat hy sy vriend op ’n manier in die steek gelaat het? En wat van Sue? Jamie verstyf haar greep op Jake se vingers. Wat vir ’n vriendin is sy as sy nie die oproep maak nie? Daar is ’n telefoon op die bedkassie, en voordat Jamie van plan kan verander, tel sy die gehoorstuk op en druk “9” vir ’n openbare lyn. Toe daar ’n luitoon opklink, skakel sy Sue en Larry se nommer.

’n Ouer vrou antwoord nadat die foon twee maal gelui het. “Hallo?” Haar stem is yl, asof sy gehuil het.

“Hallo, dis Jamie Bryan. Is Sue daar?”

“Hallo, Jamie. Ek is Larry se ma.”

“O ... haai.” Jamie laat sak haar kop in haar hande. Natuurlik. Larry se ma bly op haar eie in die Bronx en kuier gereeld by Larry en Sue, en tipies ouma is sy gaande oor Katy. Die vrou is waarskynlik net so rasend oor Larry se situasie soos Sue. “Het ... het julle al iets gehoor?”

“Iemand van die departement het gebel.” Die vrou begin huil. “Ek’s jammer ... ek dink ek is nog in skok.”

“Dis oukei.” Jamie voel hoe haar oë ook begin brand. “Ons is almal in skok.” Die ouer vrou snuif en voltooi haar sin. “Die man wat gebel het, sê Larry word vermis. Larry en al die mans van Enjin 57.”

“Nie al die mans nie.” Jamie wens amper sy hoef dit nie vir die vrou te sê nie. Hoe is dit dat Jake lewe en langs haar in ’n hospitaalbed lê terwyl Larry en die res van die eenheid onder veertig verdiepings staal en sement begrawe lê? “Jake lewe. Ek’s by hom in die hospitaal.”

Larry se ma gee ’n gillettjie. “Ag, Jamie, dis wonderlik. Ek sal Sue dadelik laat weet.”

“Is ... is sy daar? Ek wil graag self vir haar sê.”

“Sy is op die oomblik in die kamer by Katy.” Die vrou aarsel. “Ek sal gaan hoor of sy wil praat.”

’n Volle minuut gaan verby. Jamie probeer aan niks anders dink as die gevoel van Jake se vingers in hare nie. Uiteindelik word die telefoon opgetel en hoor sy Sue se stem oor die lyn.

“Hallo? Jamie?”

“Ag, Sue ... hulle moet hom kry. Hulle moet net.”

Hulle albei begin huil en die geluid van hulle snikke klink gedemp oor die telefoonlyn. Toe Jamie uiteindelik kan praat, is haar stem hoog en yl van die seer wat in haar keel opgebou het. “Ek’s jammer, Sue. Ek’s so jammer.”

“Hulle sal hom kry. Ek ... ek moet dit glo.” Sy haal twee keer vinnig asem en uiter iets tussen ’n lag en ’n snik. “Larry se ma sê hulle het vir Jake gekry.”

“Ja.” Jamie vryf moeg oor haar voorkop. “Hulle het hom onder die stasie se brandweerwa gekry. Hy het ’n hoofbesering en brandwonde opgedoen. Ek is by hom in die hospitaal.”

“Gaan hy oukei wees?” Daar is steeds trane in Sue se stem, maar sy klink heelwat kalmer.

“Ek dink so. Die dokter was nog nie hier nie. Die hospitaal loop oor.”

“Dit maak nie sin nie, Jamie.”

Sy weet instinktief waarvan Sue praat. As hulle Jake op grondvlak gekry het, waarom was Larry nie by hom nie? Hulle werk altyd sy aan sy. “Jy bedoel waarom hulle nie bymekaar was nie?”

“Presies.” Sue blaas haar asem uit. “Het hulle onder die wa gekry? Binnekant? Dalk lê Larry nog daar iewers.”

Dit is iets waaraan Jamie nog nie gedink het nie. “Ek dink jy moet kaptein Hisel bel. Hy was die een wat Jake gekry het.”

“Dalk moet ek.” Vir die eerste keer is daar ’n sprankie hoop in Sue se stem.

“As ek enigiets hoor, sal ek jou bel.”

“Ek sal hier wees.” Die meeste mense sou nou aangebied het om te bid, maar Jamie kan haarself nie sover kry om dit te sê nie. Hulle albei weet dat sy skepties oor geloofsdinge is. En na wat vandag gebeur het, is sy bang om by Sue ’n verwagting te skep deur te belowe om iets te doen wat nie kan help nie.

“Moenie hoop opgee nie.”

“Oukei. En, Jamie, wanneer Jake bykom, sê vir hom ons is lief vir hom.”

# Chapter FIFTEEN

SEPTEMBER 11, 2001, EVENING

There was nothing Laura could do but wait.

Clay had come over sometime before noon, and together they sat by the phone and watched the television reports come in. Thousands of people were missing and feared dead. Entire staffs from a dozen firms who'd worked in offices on the top floors of the Twin Towers were most likely gone.

She'd called Murphy six times, but now it was getting dark on the West Coast and pushing ten o'clock in New York City. For the past twelve hours, Laura kept telling herself the same thing. Eric was somewhere safe. He had to be. Koppel and Grant was on a floor that would've had time to evacuate. Certainly, he and the others had been among the throng of people who'd managed to escape. But if that was the case, why hadn't he called?

Not only that, but Laura had tried his cell phone at least once every ten minutes since Clay arrived. Each time the message was the same. The caller at that number wasn't available or was out of the service area. Laura curled her legs beneath her and stared at the television, unable to pull her eyes away. In the background she could hear Clay talking with Josh, helping him with his homework.

Laura wasn't sure what she'd have done without Clay. When he wasn't keeping Josh busy, he sat at the other end of the sofa doing nothing but answering her questions.

"He should've gotten out, don't you think?" she'd ask.

"Definitely. People made it out from higher than sixty-four. Everything should be fine, Laura."

"He's just having trouble finding a phone, right?"

"Right."

She'd be quiet for a while, try Murphy again or Eric's cell phone.

Then she'd start the questions over again. "He could walk down sixty-four flights of stairs, couldn't he?"

"Yes, Laura. He's in great shape."

"How long do you think that would've taken him?"

Clay would think about the question. "Twenty minutes, maybe thirty depending on how many people were in the stairwell."

"But people were moving down the steps pretty quickly, isn't that what they said?"

"Yes. There was no panic, just an orderly evacuation."

"That's what I thought."

And again she'd focus on the TV. In that manner, she'd passed the entire day. In some strange way, Clay's presence made the day feel more normal, as though Eric was only away on business and Clay was hanging around looking for something to do.

When Josh came home from school, he'd walked up to her and given her a hug. "Did Dad call?"

Laura's heart had felt ice cold, frozen in fear. But somehow she'd managed a smile. "Not yet." Tears had welled up in her eyes. "He will. As soon as he can find a phone."

Clay must have seen it in her face then, realized that she was about to snap. "Your mom needs to rest a little, okay, buddy?" He'd put his arm around Josh.

"Okay." Josh bent over and kissed her cheek. "He'll be all right, Mom. Really."

Laura had only nodded and shifted her gaze once more to the TV. They were interviewing survivors every few minutes, people who had made it out of the Twin Towers. Maybe they'd find Eric and talk to him, ask him about his escape. Laura couldn't afford to miss it if they did. And so she'd watched the screen, barely taking time to blink.

Hours had slipped by while Josh and Clay shot baskets in the backyard. Now Laura could smell something cooking in the kitchen behind



her, but she had no interest in eating or even tearing herself from the TV until Clay entered the room and sat down. He set his hand on her knee and waited until he had her full attention. "You need a break."

She shook her head. "I need to find him."

"Thousands of people escaped. There's no reason to think they'll find Eric and interview him. Besides, Eric wouldn't be milling around Manhattan. He'd be looking for a way to find a phone. Don't you think?"

Clay's expression was gentle, and Laura felt her defenses fall. "I need to talk to Murphy."

Clay studied her eyes, and the corners of his lips lifted in a sad smile. "Murphy said he'd call." He nodded toward the kitchen. "I made spaghetti. Come eat."

"I'm not hungry."

"Just sit with us. Have a glass of water." Clay's voice grew even softer. "I'm worried too. But you need a break, Laura. Sitting here isn't going to hurry his phone call."

Laura searched Clay's face. "You think he's okay, though, right?"

"Definitely." The look in his eyes was so certain that it fanned life in the embers of her heart. Her mouth was dry, and she realized she hadn't had any water since breakfast. "Okay."

Laura forced herself to the table. She took three sips from her water glass and nodded. "I'm fine. Just tired." She looked at Clay. "I need him to call."

"He will." Clay's eyes held hers. "I know he will."

They ate in silence, and afterwards, Laura returned to the TV. Clay helped Josh with his shower, and in the distant background, she could hear him reading the boy his favorite book. Laura closed her eyes and listened. Clay's voice was so much like Eric's she could almost pretend her husband was home, safe, sitting next to their son reading to him.

Laura blinked and realized the obvious. Eric never read to Josh, so a scene like that with her husband and her son couldn't be happening

upstairs.

Not even in her imagination.

Josh was clean and in his pajamas at eight o'clock when he came down and kissed Laura good-night. Clay was in the kitchen doing the dishes.

"Mom ... you're still worried, aren't you?"

Laura took her eyes off the TV and looked at him. "Yeah, honey." Her eyes stung from a day of crying and staring at the television. "I'm worried."

"Why hasn't he called?"

"Maybe the phones don't work." Laura hugged Josh and stroked his back. "There's a lot of bad stuff going on in New York City. So that could be it."

Clay came into the room and positioned himself a few feet away. "Ready for bed, buddy?"

"Wait!" Josh drew back and his eyes lit up. "Maybe he's working!" He sounded as though this were the perfect explanation. "Maybe he had some extra things to do. He never calls us when he's on trips."

As soon as Josh said the words, Laura shifted her gaze to Clay. The man had idolized his older brother as long as Laura had known him. Now she watched Clay take the news. The questions in his eyes could only be answered one way, and Laura gave him the slightest nod, confirmation that what Josh had said was true.

Eric never called home when he was out of town.

Laura blinked and focused her attention on Josh again. The look on his face made Laura want to weep. But she couldn't. The boy was serious. All he knew of his father's business trips were that they ranked higher in importance than anything at home, and that when he was gone, there were long stretches of days without any contact. "Yes, sweetie," she patted his knee. "Maybe that's it."

"G'night, Mom." He leaned up and kissed her cheek. "Dad'll be home

on Thursday. Then he'll tell us all about the fire.”

She hugged him again. “Okay.”

Clay held out his hand and led the boy upstairs. Ten minutes later he returned to the sofa where Laura was and sat several feet away from her. “He's asleep.”

“Thank you.” She held up the remote and flicked off the TV. “I can't watch another minute. Not tonight.” She looked at Clay. “There's a lot you didn't know about us.”

“He ... he never calls you when he's gone?”

“Clay ...” Laura exhaled in a way that seemed to come from the soles of her feet. “He barely talks to us even when he is here.”

“I knew there was trouble when I moved here, but nothing like this.” Clay's mouth hung open a bit, and he gave a frustrated shake of his head. “Eric's the greatest guy I know, Laura. He ... he was so in love with you ...”

Fresh tears poked pins at Laura's eyes. “A lot's happened since then.”

“A lot?”

Laura's voice faded some. “More than you know.”

“Tell me, Laura.” Clay leaned forward and dug his elbows into his thighs. “I've got all night.”

And so she did. She took him back to the spring of her twenty-first year when she gave birth to a beautiful baby girl, a baby who would never open her eyes or take a single breath.

“Eric blamed himself.” Laura ran her fingers beneath her eyes and sniffed. “He told me I'd never want for good medical care again.”

“I'm sorry, Laura.” Clay stared at the floor for a minute, and when he looked up, the sorrow in his eyes was deeper than the ocean. “I never knew.”

Laura lifted her shoulders and swallowed a sob. “We ... we never told anyone.”

“But then Josh came, right?”

“Right ...” She looked at the space between her feet. “But things between Eric and me only got worse.”

She walked him through the next few years, the birth of Josh and the day when Eric was hired by Koppel and Grant. “You know ...” She met his gaze again. “He was more excited about the job than the fact that he was a father.”

Clay's features were frozen, caught up in disbelief. “I always thought you were the perfect family—money, success, good health, and the kind of love most people never know.”

“Hardly.” A sad laugh sounded in the back of her throat. “Sometimes it feels like we never loved like that.”

Clay opened his mouth to say something, but before either of them could speak again, the phone rang. The receiver was between them, next to Laura on the sofa. She grabbed it, her eyes still fixed on Clay's. “Hello?”

“Laura ... it's Murphy.”

Relief filled her heart. “Thank God, Murphy. When did you hear from him?”

Silence shouted at her from the other end. “I didn't.” The man gave a shaky sigh. “I heard from one of the associates in the New York office. Hank Walden.”

Clay was watching her, trying to gauge the news. She nodded, impatient for Murphy to get to the point. “Okay, so where's Eric? That's all I need to know.”

“Ah, Laura ... I hate to tell you this.”

He hesitated, and Laura wanted to scream at him. “Just say it, Murphy. I've been waiting all day to hear something, now come on!” Laura's hands shook, and she could no longer look at Clay. The sudden fear in his expression only made the moment seem more terrifying. She looked down at her feet. “Tell me!”

“I'm sorry, Laura ... Eric's missing. Eric and Allen Koppel. Everyone else at Koppel and Grant is accounted for.”

The fainting feeling was back.

Laura hunched over her lap and let her head fall near her knees. “That’s ... that’s impossible. They must be together somewhere. Eric said they had a meeting today, so maybe ...” She remembered Josh’s idea. “Maybe they’re finishing business somewhere before they check in. Maybe —”

“Laura.” Murphy cut her off. His voice was filled with regret. “There’s more. Hank saw Eric and Allen in one of the offices after everyone else evacuated the floor. They wouldn’t come ... they were ... they were working on a few portfolios.” Murphy made a soft groan. “The Koppel and Grant group walked down the stairs together and waited near the outside door of the building several minutes—until police cleared them out.” He gave a sad huff. “Laura ... Eric and Allen never came. No one saw either of them after that.”

Laura could almost feel her world collapsing. She wanted to argue with Murphy, tell him he was wrong and that Eric and Allen were somewhere safe. They had to be. But the information Murphy had told her was hard to dispute. Finally, she sat up some and shook her head. “That’s okay, Murphy. Thanks for calling.”

Then without waiting for him to speak, she clicked the phone off and dropped it on the floor. A rushing sound filled her ears, and the walls felt like they were closing in. What had Eric done? He and Allen had stayed in an office? Working on portfolios? While the single worst disaster in the country’s history unfolded, they could think of nothing more important than financial management and the investment needs of their clients?

She opened her mouth and a cry came out, a cry that was both desperate and quiet at the same time. “No ... Eric ... why?” A wordless moan sounded from someplace deep and desperate, a place in her heart that was only now realizing the horror of her situation. “God ... help me!” Her cry grew louder and she felt Clay move close.

He slid next to her and put his hand on her back. His touch brought

her to her senses, and she turned to him, burying herself in his embrace and sobbing from someplace she hadn't known had existed until now. Twenty minutes passed, then thirty. Finally, she pulled herself away from Clay and stood up. The shock and sorrow were wearing off. In its place was a fierce anger like nothing Laura had felt before.

"How dare he!" She moved her stiff legs from one side of the family room to the other. "Even *today* the job was more important to him."

Clay still didn't know what Murphy had said. He wrung his hands, balanced on the edge of the sofa as though he wasn't sure if he should stay seated or come to her. "Did they find him?"

"No." She stopped and blew a stray piece of blonde hair off her forehead. "He and Allen wouldn't go down with the others. They stayed, Clay, and you know why?"

His expression changed, and a knowing look crossed his face. "Not for work?"

"Yes!" She paced again, this time faster than before, with more fury. "They worked while every other person on their floor evacuated." She hesitated and planted her hands on her hips, searching Clay's face for some kind of answer. "Weren't we worth more than that? Didn't he know he'd be leaving us behind, leaving Josh without a father?"

Clay bit his lip, and Laura guessed he was keeping himself from stating the obvious. That apparently Josh had never had a father. Not by any practical sense of the word. Instead, he stood up, crossed the room, and held her the way she needed to be held. In a way that pushed her anger aside and let an incalculable sorrow take its place. "Why, Clay? Why'd he do it?"

"They might still find him, Laura. You can't give up."

"I know." She sniffed and pulled away enough to look at him. Fresh tears trickled down her cheeks. "I'm mad ... but I keep telling myself he must be alive somewhere. Maybe he and Allen waited a few minutes and then went down. Maybe they took a different stairwell and missed the other

people from Koppel and Grant. And maybe they're at some kind of waiting area, trying to get out of the city so they can make a phone call and tell everyone they're okay."

"If we don't hear from him tomorrow, maybe we should go there. Check the hospitals and see if they've found him. He might not have I.D. on him." Clay's voice was soft as he searched her eyes. "If he's lying in a hospital somewhere unconscious, no one would have any way to know who he was or how to reach you."

The muscles in Laura's chest relaxed just a bit, enough for her to catch her breath. "I hadn't thought of that."

"See ... there's lots of possibilities." He gave her arms a gentle squeeze. "We'll find him, Laura. I'll do whatever I can to help you."

The idea of going to New York seemed outrageous. Especially now. The FAA had said airports could remain closed for days. But if Clay was willing to come with her, it might be their only hope. Then another idea hit her. "We could call first, see if any of the patients are unidentified."

"Right."

"He's gotta be somewhere."

An image came to mind of Eric and Allen talking business on the sixty-fourth floor as the south tower collapsed. If he didn't call by tomorrow, he might be in a hospital or wandering around the city with a head injury, unable to remember his phone number. But the odds were he'd been buried alive. Right next to Allen, devoted to the job until his final moments.

Another series of sobs gathered in her heart. Who were they kidding? If Eric hadn't called her by now, he was dead. It was that simple. He and Allen had made a last-minute attempt at getting an edge in the financial market, and it had cost them their lives.

Her emotions shifted again, and this time defeat settled in and made her legs ache. "Hold me, Clay. I can't bear it ... I can't."

"Oh, Laura. I'm so sorry." Clay soothed his hand along the back of

her head and brought her close again. In his arms she had the slightest sense that maybe ... just maybe she'd survive. It was a different feeling entirely than the way she'd felt in his arms a few days ago. All questions about whether she'd married the wrong brother were gone now, and only deep friendship and comfort remained. No matter how bad her marriage had been, no matter how differently she'd enjoyed Clay's company a few days ago, in the course of a few hours that morning everything had changed.

Not just for Laura and Clay, but for the entire nation.

## Vyftien

11 September 2001, aand

Al wat Laura kan doen, is wag.

Clay het laatoggend deurgekom en hulle het saam by die telefoon gesit en die nuusgebeure gevolg. Duisende mense word vermis en is moontlik dood. Verskeie maatskappye met kantore op die boonste vloere van die Twin Towers het waarskynlik al hulle personeel verloor.

Sy het Murphy ses maal gebel, maar in Los Angeles is dit nou al donker en in New York reeds tienuur die aand. Die afgelope twaalf uur het Laura oor en oor vir haarself bly sê dat Eric veilig is. Hy moet wees. Koppel & Grant is op een van die vloere wat genoeg tyd sou hê om te ontruim. Hy en die ander moes tussen die duisende mense gewees het wat daarin sou slaag om te ontsnap. Maar as dit die geval is, waarom het hy nog nie gebel nie?

Nie net dit nie, maar sedert Clay gekom het, het Laura hom ten minste elke tien minute op sy selfoon gebel. Die boodskap bly dieselfde. Die persoon is nie beskikbaar nie of het tans nie opvangs nie. Laura vou haar bene onder haar in en staar gehipnotiseerd na die televisie, nie in staat om haar oë daarvan weg te skeur nie. Op die agtergrond hoor sy Clay se stem waar hy besig is om Josh met sy huiswerk te help.

Laura weet nie wat sy sonder Clay sou doen nie. Wanneer hy nie besig is om Josh geselskap te hou nie, sit hy op die ander punt van die bank en beantwoord haar vrae.

“Hy sou betyds uitgekóm het, nè?” sou sy vra.

“Definitief. Heelwat mense wat bo die vier-en-sestigste vloer gewerk het, het uitgekóm. Alles gaan oukei wees, Laura.”

“Hy sukkel net om by ’n telefoon uit te kom, nè?”

“Ja.”

Na ’n rukkie se stilte sou sy weer vir Murphy bel of Eric op sy sel probeer



bereik. Minute later sou sy van voor af met haar vrae begin. “Die vier-en-sestig verdiepings sou nie te veel vir hom gewees het nie, nè?”

“Nee, Laura. Hy is topfiks.”

“Hoe lank dink jy sou dit hom geneem het?”

Clay sou ’n oomblik dink. “Twintig, dalk dertig minute, afhangende van hoeveel mense op die trappe was.”

“Maar die mense het taamlik vinnig beweeg, het hulle gesê.”

“Ja. Die ontruiming het blykbaar ordelik verloop.”

“Dis wat ek gedink het.”

Dan sou sy weer op die televisie fokus. Dis hoe sy die hele dag deurgebring het. Op ’n manier het Clay se teenwoordigheid die dag meer normaal laat voel, asof Eric op ’n sakebesoek was en Clay by hulle kom kuier het.

Toe Josh van die skool af kom, het hy ingekom en haar ’n drukkie gegee. “Het Pappa al gebel?”

Laura se hart was yskoud van vrees. Maar sy het tog daarin geslaag om te glimlag. “Nog nie.” Haar oë het vol tranes geraak. “Hy sal nog. Sodra hy by ’n telefoon kan uitkom.”

Clay moes op haar gesig gesien het dat sy op breekpunt was. “Lyk my jou ma het ’n bietjie rus nodig.” Hy het sy arm om Josh se skouers gesit.

“Oukei.” Josh het nader gestaan en haar op die wang gesoen. “Hy sal oukei wees, Mamma. Regtig.”

Laura het geknik en haar oë het weer na die televisie gesoek. Elke nou en dan het hulle ’n onderhoud met ’n oorlewende gevoer, iemand wat dit uit die Twin Towers gemaak het. Dalk sou hulle Eric kry en met hom praat, hom oor sy noue ontkoming uitvra. Laura kon dit nie bekostig om iewers anders te wees indien dit sou gebeur nie. Sy het die skerm die hele middag soos ’n valk dopgehou.

Die ure het verbygesleep terwyl Josh en Clay in die agterplaas doele geskiet het. Nou is daar iets in die kombuis aan die gang, maar sy het geen belang in kos of die lus om haar van die televisie weg te skeur nie. Uit die hoek van haar oog sien sy dat Clay ingekom het. Hy kom sit by haar, plaas sy hand op haar knie en wag totdat hy haar volle aandag het. “Jy het ’n blaaskans nodig.” Sy skud haar kop. “Ek het my man nodig.”

“Duisende mense het oorleef. Daar is geen rede om te dink hulle sal Eric kry en ’n onderhoud met hom voer nie. Eric sal in elk geval nie in Manhattan rondhang nie. Hy sal probeer om by ’n telefoon uit te kom. Dink jy nie so nie?”

Clay se uitdrukking is sag en Laura voel haar skanse meegee. “Ek moet met Murphy praat.”

Clay kyk ondersoekend in haar oë en ’n hartseer glimlag verskyn om sy mond. “Murphy het gesê hy sal bel.” Hy knik na die kombuis. “Ek het spaghetti gemaak. Kom eet.”

“Ek’s nie honger nie.”

“Kom sit net by ons. Drink ’n glas water.” Clay se stem raak nog sagter. “Ek’s

ook bekommerd. Maar jy moet 'n blaaskans neem, Laura. Om hier te sit, gaan nie maak dat hy vinniger bel nie.”

Laura bestudeer Clay se gesig. “Jy dink hy’s oukei, nè?”

“Beslis.” Daar is soveel sekerheid in sy oë dat sy opnuut moed skep. Haar mond is droog en sy besef dat sy met ontbyt laas water gedrink het. “Oukei.”

Laura dwing haarself tot by die tafel. Sy neem drie slukke water en knik.

“Ek’s oukei. Net moeg.” Sy kyk na Clay. “As hy net wil bel.”

“Hy sal.” Clay laat nie haar oë gaan nie. “Ek weet hy sal.”

Hulle eet in stilte en na die tyd neem Laura weer haar plek voor die televisie in. Clay help Josh om gestort te kom en in die agtergrond kan sy hom ’n storie uit Clay se gunstelingboek hoor lees. Laura maak haar oë toe en luister. Clay klink so baie soos Eric dat sy haar amper kan verbeel haar man is tuis en hy sit by hulle seuntjie en lees vir hom ’n storie.

Laura se oë gaan oop toe dit haar tref. Eric het nog nooit vir Josh voorgelees nie. ’n Toneeltjie soos dié met haar man en seun kan dus nie bo in Josh se kamer afspeel nie.

Nie eens in haar verbeelding nie.

Josh is skoon en in sy nagklere toe hy agtuur ondertoe kom om Laura nag te soen. Clay is in die kombuis besig om skottelgoed te was.

“Mamma ... Mamma is nog steeds bekommerd, nè?”

Laura neem haar oë van die televisie af weg en kyk na hom. “Ja, my skat.”

Haar oë is seer van die hele dag se huil en na die televisie staar. “Ek’s bekommerd.”

“Hoekom het hy nie gebel nie?”

“Dalk werk die telefone nie.” Laura gee Josh ’n drukkie en vryf oor sy rug.

“Daar is baie slegte goed in die stad aan die gang. Dalk is dit die rede.”

Clay kom in en gaan staan ’n entjie van hulle af. “Reg om te gaan slaap, grootman?”

“Wag!” Josh sit skielik regop en sy oë helder op. “Dalk is hy besig!” Dit klink asof hy die perfekte oplossing beet het. “Dalk moes hy ekstra werk doen. Hy bel nooit wanneer hy weg is nie.”

Die oomblik toe Josh se woorde uit is, kyk Laura na Clay. Die man het sy ouer broer nog altyd verafgod. Nou sien sy hoe Clay op die nuus reageer. Die vrae in sy oë kan net op een manier beantwoord word, en Laura knik baie effens om Josh se woorde te bevestig.

Eric bel hulle nooit wanneer hy uitstедig is nie.

Laura knip haar oë en fokus weer op Josh. Die uitdrukking op sy gesiggie wil haar laat huil. Maar sy kan nie. Die seuntjie is ernstig. Al wat hy van sy pa se sakebesoeke weet, is dit is belangriker as enigiets by die huis, en wanneer hy weg is, verloop daar soms dae voordat hulle weer van hom hoor. “Ja, my liefie.” Sy sit haar hand op sy been. “Dalk is jy reg.”

“Nag, Mamma.” Hy soen haar op die wang. “Pappa gaan Donderdag by die huis wees. Dan sal hy ons alles van die brand vertel.”

Sy gee hom nog ’n drukkie. “Oukei.”

Clay hou sy hand uit en neem die seuntjie boontoe. Tien minute later is hy terug en kom sit weer op die bank twee sitplekke van Laura af. “Hy slaap.” “Dankie.” Sy tel die afstandbeheerder op en skakel die televisie af. “Ek kan nie meer kyk nie. Nie vanaand nie.” Sy kyk na Clay. “Daar is baie wat jy nie van ons weet nie.”

“Bel hy nooit wanneer hy weg is nie?”

“Clay ... ” Laura gee ’n sug wat klink asof dit ’n ver pad kom. “Selfs al is hy hier praat hy skaars met ons.”

“Ek het geweet daar is probleme toe ek hiernatoe getrek het, maar ek het nie besef dis so erg nie.” Clay se mond hang halfoop en hy skud sy kop. “Eric is die wonderlikste ou wat ek ken, Laura. Hy ... hy was so verlief op jou ... ”

Die trane verskyn opnuut in Laura se oë. “Baie het in die tussentyd gebeur.”

“Baie?”

Laura se stem vervaag. “Meer as wat jy weet.”

“Vertel my, Laura.” Clay leun vorentoe en plant sy elmboë op sy bobene. “Ek het die hele nag.”

Sy neem hom terug na die lente van haar een-en-twintigste jaar toe sy aan ’n pragtige babadogtertjie geboorte gegee het, ’n dogtertjie wat nooit haar ogies sou oopmaak of asemhaal nie.

“Eric het homself blameer.” Laura vee haar wange af en snuif. “Hy het vir my gesê daar sou nooit weer te min geld vir die beste mediese sorg wees nie.”

“Ek’s jammer, Laura.” Clay staar vir ’n oomblik na die vloer en toe hy opkyk, is daar ’n diep hartseer in sy oë. “Ek het nie geweet nie.”

Laura trek haar skouers op en onderdruk ’n snik. “Ons ... ons het niemand daarvan vertel nie.”

“Maar toe is Josh gebore.”

“Ja ... ” Sy kyk na die vloer voor haar voete. “Maar tussen my en Eric het dit net slegter gegaan.”

Sy vertel hom van die daaropvolgende jare, Josh se geboorte en die dag toe Eric by Koppel & Grant aangestel is. “Jy weet, Clay ... ” Sy kyk weer na hom.

“Hy was meer opgewonde oor die werk as die feit dat hy ’n pa was.”

Clay se ongeloof staan oor sy strak gesig geskryf. “Ek het altyd gedink julle is die volmaakte gesin – geld, sukses, gesondheid en die soort liefde wat baie min mense ooit ervaar.”

“Kwalik.” Sy gee ’n hartseer laggie. “Soms voel dit asof ons nooit so lief vir mekaar was nie.”

Clay maak sy mond oop om iets te sê, maar die foon lui voordat hy kan praat. Die telefoon lê tussen hulle, langs Laura. Sy gryp die gehoorstuk en kyk na Clay. “Hallo?”

“Laura ... dis Murphy.”

’n Groot verligting versprei deur haar. “Dank God, Murphy. Wanneer het jy van hom gehoor?”

Daar is ’n oorverdowende stilte. “Ek het nie.” Die man sug beweerig. “Ek het van een van die vennote in New York gehoor. Hank Walden.”

Clay hou haar dop en probeer die nuus peil. Sy knik, ongeduldig dat Murphy tot die punt moet kom. “Oukei, sê my net waar Eric is. Dis al wat ek wil weet.”

“Laura ... ek wens ek hoef dit nie vir jou te sê nie.”

Hy aarsel en Laura wil op hom skree. “Sê dit net, Murphy. Ek wag al die hele dag om iets te hoor!” Laura se hande bewe en sy kyk nie meer na Clay nie. Die skielike vrees op sy gesig maak die ontsetting van die oomblik net nog erger. Sy kyk na haar voete. “Sê vir my!”

“Ek’s jammer, Laura ... Eric word vermis. Eric en Allen Koppel. Die res van die personeel het almal as groep beweeg.”

Sy voel lighoofdig.

Laura knak vooroor en laat haar kop tussen haar knieë hang. “Dis ... dis onmoontlik. Hulle moet saam iewers wees. Eric het gesê hulle het vandag ’n vergadering gehad. Dalk ... ” Sy onthou van Josh se idee. “Dalk moes hulle iets afhandel voordat hulle werk toe is. Dalk ... ”

“Laura.” Murphy onderbreek haar. Sy stem is simpatiek. “Daar’s meer. Hank het Eric en Allen in een van die kantore gesien nadat almal die vloer ontruim het. Hulle wou nie kom nie ... hulle het ... hulle het aan ’n paar portefeuljes gewerk.” Murphy gee ’n sagte kreun. “Die ouens van Koppel & Grant het saam afgekom en vir ’n ruk voor die ingang van die gebou gewag – totdat die polisie hulle beveel het om te loop.” Hy blaas sy asem uit. “Laura ... Eric en Allen het nooit gekom nie. Niemand het hulle daarna weer gesien nie.”

Laura kan amper voel hoe haar wêreld rondom haar verkrummel. Sy wil met Murphy baklei, wil vir hom sê dat hy verkeerd is en dat Eric en Allen iewers veilig is. Hulle moet wees. Maar sy het geen verweer teen die inligting wat Murphy haar gegee het nie. Uiteindelik sit sy regop en skud haar kop. “Dis oukei, Murphy. Dankie dat jy gebel het.”

Sy wag nie vir hom om te praat nie, maar druk die telefoon dood en laat val dit op die vloer. ’n Gedruis weerklink in haar ore en dit voel asof die vertrek al hoe kleiner word. Wat het Eric gedoen? Het hy en Allen in ’n kantoor agtergebly? Om aan portefeuljes te werk? Terwyl die grootste ramp in die land se geskiedenis rondom hulle ontvou, kon hulle aan niks belangriker as hulle finansiële verpligtinge en hulle kliënte se beleggingsbehoefes dink nie.

Sy maak haar mond oop en hoor haarself gil, ’n gil wat halfdesperaas en halfgedemp is. “Nee ... Eric ... waarom?” ’n Kreun kom van iewers diep uit haar binneste, ’n plek in haar hart wat nou eers die verskriklike omvang van haar situasie besef. “Here ... help my!” Sy hoor haar stem klim en voel hoe Clay naderskuif.

Hy kom sit langs haar en plaas sy hand op haar rug. Sy aanraking bring haar tot besinning en sy verberg haarself in sy arms en snik. Twintig minute gaan verby, dan dertig. Uiteindelik maak sy haar los van Clay en staan op. Die skok en ontsetting is besig om plek te maak vir ’n groter woede as enigiets wat Laura al ooit ervaar het.

“Hoe kon hy!” Sy begin driftig heen en weer loop. “Selfs *vandag* was sy werk

belangriker vir hom.”

Clay weet nog nie wat Murphy gesê het nie. Hy sit op die punt van die rusbank en vryf sy hande asof hy nie weet of hy moet bly sit of na haar moet gaan nie. “Het hulle hom gekry?”

“Nee.” Sy gaan staan en blaas ’n los haarstring uit haar gesig. “Hy en Allen het nie saam met die ander afgekom nie. Hulle het agtergebly, Clay, en weet jy hoekom?”

Sy uitdrukking verander en toe daag daar begrip in sy oë. “Nie vir werk nie?”

“Ja!” Sy begin weer loop, hierdie keer vinniger as tevore, met meer drif.

“Hulle het gewerk terwyl elke liewe mens op hulle vloer ontruim het.” Sy aarsel en plant haar hande op haar heupe en kyk na Clay asof sy ’n antwoord by hom soek. “Was ons nie vir hom meer werd as ’n portefeulje nie? Het hy nie besef dat hy ons agterlaat nie? Dat hy Josh sonder ’n pa los nie?”

Clay byt sy onderlip vas en Laura kan sien hy bedwing hom om nie te sê wat hulle albei reeds weet nie: Josh het eintlik nooit ’n pa gehad nie. Nie in die ware sin van die woord nie. In plaas daarvan staan hy op, loop na haar toe en omhels haar op die manier wat sy so dringend nodig het. Op ’n manier wat haar woede met ’n onmeetlike hartseer vervang. “Hoekom, Clay? Hoekom het hy dit gedoen?”

“Daar is steeds ’n kans dat hulle hom gaan kry, Laura. Jy kan nie opgee nie.”

“Ek weet.” Sy snuif en staan terug. Die trane loop opnuut oor haar wange.

“Ek’s woedend ... maar ek bly vir myself sê dat hy iewers nog lewe. Dalk het hy en Allen ’n paar minute gewag en toe afgekom. Dalk het hulle by ’n ander stel trappe afgegaan en die res van Koppel & Grant gemis. En dalk sit hulle iewers en wag om uit die stad te kom sodat hulle kan bel en ons laat weet hulle het dit gemaak.”

“As ons môre nog nie van hom gehoor het nie, moet ons dalk soontoe gaan. By die hospitale gaan hoor of hulle hom gekry het. Hy het dalk nie sy ID by hom nie.” Clay praat sag terwyl hy ondersoekend in haar oë kyk. “As hy bewusteloos in ’n hospitaal lê, sal niemand weet wie hy is of waar om jou in die hande te kry nie.”

Die spiere in Laura se bolyf ontspan effens en dit voel asof sy haar asem terugkry. “Ek het nie daaraan gedink nie.”

“Sien jy ... daar is baie moontlikhede.” Hy gee haar arm ’n sagte drukkie.

“Ons gaan hom kry, Laura. Ek gaan alles moontlik doen om jou te help.”

Dis verregaande om New York toe te wil gaan. Veral nou. Die lugvaartowerheid het gesê dat die lughawens moontlik dae lank gesluit sal wees. Maar as Clay bereid is om saam met haar te gaan, is dit dalk haar enigste hoop. Toe dink sy aan iets. “Ons kan eers bel, hoor of daar ongeïdentifiseerde pasiënte is.”

“Goeie idee.”

“Hy moet iewers wees.”

In haar gedagtes sien sy Eric en Allen waar hulle op die vier-en-sestigste vloer besigheid praat toe die suidelike toring ineenstort. As hy teen môre nog nie

gebel het nie, lê hy dalk in 'n hospitaal of dwaal hy met 'n hoofbesering deur die strate. Maar daar is 'n kans dat hy lewend begrawe is. Langs Allen, tot die dood toe getrou aan sy werk.

Sy voel hoe sy van voor af begin snik. Wie probeer hulle om die bos lei? As Eric nou nog nie gebel het nie, is hy dood. Punt. Hy en Allen het vir oulaas probeer om hulle posisie in die finansiële mark te versterk, en dit het hulle hul lewens gekos.

Haar emosies verander weer, en hierdie keer is dit 'n verslane gevoel wat haar bene laat pyn. “Hou my vas, Clay. Dis net te veel ... te erg.”

“Ag, Laura. Ek's so jammer.” Clay plaas sy hand oor haar agterkop en trek haar nader. So in sy arms voel dit asof sy dalk ... net dalk sal oorleef. Dis 'n heel ander gevoel as wat sy 'n paar dae tevore in sy omhelsing ervaar het. Al haar twyfel oor haar keuse van 'n huweliksmaat is weg, en al wat oorbly, is 'n hegte, vertroostende vriendskap tussen haar en Clay. Maak nie saak hoe ongelukkig haar huwelik is nie, maak nie saak hoe anders sy Clay se geselskap 'n paar dae gelede geniet het nie, binne die kwessie van 'n paar ure daardie oggend het alles verander.

Nie net vir Laura en Clay nie, maar vir die hele land.

# Chapter SIXTEEN

SEPTEMBER 13, 2001

Whenever Jake might wake up, Jamie wanted to be there.

Now it was Thursday morning, and she'd done nothing but sit by his side, day and night, and try not to think about what was happening across New York and throughout the ranks of the FDNY. Jake's father had driven into the city after the towers collapsed and met with Jamie at the hospital.

"I'll stay with Sierra," he told her as he left that afternoon. "I'll be here as long as you need me, Jamie." He'd cast another look at Jake. "He'll be okay. I can feel it."

Jamie had hugged him then, appreciating the way his presence gave her the hint of hope and strength, something she desperately needed. Every minute Jake lay unconscious only worsened the fog of fear for Jamie, but Jake's father was positive.

"Keep your chin up." Jake's father had kissed her on the forehead as he left. "Jake needs you. He's going to be fine."

Jamie's feelings were all over the board. "The numbers of missing men ... I can't ... I can't stop thinking about it."

A shadow fell across Jim Bryan's face. "More than any of us can imagine."

The hours and days that followed had been nothing but a blurry routine. Sit by Jake, catch some sleep, wake up, wash her face at the small sink in Jake's hospital room, call Sierra, talk to Jake's father, and then find her place beside her husband once more.

Wednesday afternoon they'd done another CT scan and found a buildup of fluid near the injured part of Jake's brain. They'd rushed him into surgery and drained the excess fluid. The operation was a success and had kept Jake's brain from being damaged by the pressure. That night she never slept at all, but simply sat in the chair by Jake's bed trying to

comprehend what had happened.

The death toll was in by then.

Three hundred and forty-three firefighters were trapped in the collapse of the World Trade Center. Rescue workers were still sifting through the rubble around the clock at a frantic pace, convinced there were people trapped in pockets beneath the surface. But with every passing hour, it seemed less likely that anyone would be found alive in the debris.

It seemed a lifetime ago that Jamie had been troubled by the death of a single firefighter. Ten a year, twenty a year. Each life was a tremendous loss. But those numbers would never compare to what had happened on September 11. Most of the time it was all Jamie could do to concentrate on the matters at hand—talking to doctors and nurses, encouraging Jake to wake up, remembering to eat. Every spare moment her mind was filled with the awful picture of firefighters, hundreds of them, hurrying up the stairs of those towers. Had any of them guessed what would happen? Could they have known that each step brought them closer to their deaths?

She hadn't heard from Sue since Tuesday afternoon, but she was certain the other men from Engine 57 hadn't been found. Captain Hisel had been in to visit twice—once Tuesday night, and again on Wednesday. Both times he gave Jamie the update she'd dreaded. The men were still missing, still buried somewhere amidst the tons of debris.

“If they're alive, we think they'll make it,” Hisel had told her. “They're strong men, all of them, in good shape. The rescue workers think there could be areas where people are still waiting for help. Some of the water being sprayed on the smoldering sections might've gotten down to them. It could be keeping them alive.”

Jamie had let the man talk, but she wasn't listening. Not really. Who was he kidding? If Engine 57 had been near the sixty-first floor when the south tower collapsed, then the bodies of Larry and the others were smack in the middle of the debris pile. There wasn't the slimmest chance they were alive. But Jamie would nod and look interested. They had nothing if



they didn't have hope.

In the hours since Hisel's last visit, Jamie had resisted the occasional urge to catch an update on the attacks. The entire nightmare was too awful, and the more she thought about it, the less able she was to think of anything else. There was only one way she could remove the awful images from her mind, the pictures of firefighters spread throughout the towers in the moments before they collapsed.

By sitting stone still and watching Jake breathe.

She held his fingers, ran her thumb along his bandaged hand, and whispered whatever thoughts crossed her mind. Sometimes she talked about the old days, back when they were kids in the same Staten Island neighborhood. Or about the way their lives had become such a miracle since Sierra joined them. Watching Jake was the only way she could convince herself it was true, that Jake had actually survived the horrendous devastation at the World Trade Center. That though hundreds of firefighter families were grieving even at that moment, she was one of the lucky ones. Her man had lived.

Two doctors had been in to talk to her. Dr. Cleary was her favorite, a kind man with a soothing tone and an easy way of explaining Jake's condition. He had a head injury, of course, that much was obvious. But Dr. Cleary had given her other details, things that helped her better understand the process of recovery once Jake woke up.

The doctor explained that Jake had a concussion, a broken left ankle, and second-degree burns on his face and arms. He had most likely been standing somewhere near the fire truck when the south tower collapsed. Why he was there when the rest of his unit was up near the middle of the building was unclear. Either way, when the tower came down it created a force that must have blown him under the truck.

"He didn't have his uniform on, and that could've been for several reasons," Dr. Cleary had told her. He pulled up a chair and looked her straight in the eye, determined only to help her get through the ordeal at

hand. He crossed his arms and continued. “But we know the blast blew his shoes off. That alone tells us we’re dealing with a fairly significant head injury. We sedated him heavily when he first arrived—to keep his brain from swelling. That danger is past, in fact ... the sedation and the surgery probably saved his life.”

The doctor bit his lip and hesitated. “Unfortunately, the trauma has left him in a coma.”

“But ... he’ll come out of it, right?” Jamie hadn’t considered the alternative. That he might not wake up from the coma, or that he could possibly spend the rest of his life being fed through a tube in a hospital bed. She shuddered at the thought and ignored a rush of nausea.

“His brain activity is strong, and the little bit of swelling he had is going down.” Dr. Cleary gave her a kind smile. “I expect he’ll wake up sometime this week.”

The doctor saved the worst news for Wednesday afternoon. He checked Jake’s vital signs and then sat down across from her again.

“Mrs. Bryan, we’re somewhat concerned about Jake’s memory.” He frowned and checked his notes. “The emergency room staff said your husband didn’t know where he was in the minutes before he lost consciousness.”

It was the first time Jamie had heard about this. Her heart sank to her knees, and she tried to think of what to say. “You mean ... all his memory? Like, what’s it called ...?”

“Amnesia. Yes, that’s a concern.” The doctor sighed. “Head injuries can definitely trigger memory loss. The question is how much loss, and for how long.” He looked down at his clipboard again. “The notes say he couldn’t remember his friend Larry ... and that Engine 57 meant nothing to him. Would you say that was significant?”

Significant? Jamie felt the blood drain from her face. She hugged herself and leaned forward, trying to stop the fear exploding inside her. Jake hadn’t remembered Larry? Or his own engine company? Jamie’s voice

was weak, as though she'd had the wind knocked from her. "Are ... are you sure?"

"I am." Empathy filled the doctor's face. "The notes are very clear. We're hoping it was only a brief memory loss, and that when he wakes up he'll remember everything. That's not unusual with a concussion. But there's chance of a longer amnesia here. I thought you should be aware." He leaned forward a bit. "So he should know Larry and Engine 57, is that right?"

Jamie closed her eyes. Her heart was racing again, and she couldn't breathe. Dr. Cleary was watching her, waiting. "Yes, of course. He was born a firefighter, Doctor. His father was one, and now he's one. It's all he's ever known." She tried to fill her lungs, but the effort only made her feel more anxious. "Larry is his ... his best friend. They work together on Engine 57. Jake should've ... he should've known that in his sleep."

Dr. Cleary shifted his gaze to Jake and stared at him for a moment. "There was one thing he said that might be a good sign, something that might mean his memory loss won't be complete or even long-term."

Jamie's hands began to tremble. She waited while the doctor flipped through several sheets of paper. "What did he say?"

"Here it is." He read straight from his notes. "The patient called out the name 'Sierra' several times before he slipped under."

Tears flooded Jamie's eyes and her heart sang. Jake had remembered Sierra! The doctor was looking at her, waiting for a response, but she could barely make out his features. He might not have remembered Larry or his engine company, but he'd remembered his precious daughter. "Sierra is ... she's our little girl."

"Good." A smile broke out on the doctor's face. "That's wonderful." He angled his head and looked at Jake again. "In fact, it's possible with the swelling going down that he won't have any memory loss once he wakes up. We'll have to wait and see. He took a pretty serious blow to the head. Anything's possible."

It was Thursday morning now, and Jamie had been awake for half an hour, long enough to know there were no changes in Jake. She crossed the room and stared out the window. The view was obscured by another building, and it was impossible to tell anything other than the fact that night had come and gone. Jamie turned back to Jake and gripped the bars on his hospital bed. *Wake up, baby ... please ...*

She waited, studying him. But there was no change, nothing to indicate he was ever going to come out of the coma.

Her eyes caught the clock on the wall, and she moved around the bed toward the phone. Sierra would be awake now, and Jamie missed her badly. She sat on the chair by Jake's bed and dialed the number.

Sierra answered on the second ring. "Hello?"

Jamie closed her eyes and felt the corners of her mouth inch upward. "Hi, honey, how's it going with Papa?"

"Good." She sounded small and worried. "When are you and Daddy coming home?"

"Very soon, baby. As soon as Daddy wakes up, we'll come home, okay?"

"I'm praying, Mommy. All the time. Papa says God's working on Daddy, making him a little bit better every day."

Jamie ignored the comment. If Jake walked out of that hospital, it wasn't because God had allowed it. After all, what about Larry? Larry loved God, didn't he? Why hadn't God kept him out of the south tower that day? There had to be countless others in similar situations, many of them devoted to God, praying to Him faithfully. And for what? For the random chance to live or die, depending on where you stood at nine o'clock Tuesday morning?

"Mommy?"

"Yes, sweetie, I'm here." She concentrated on her daughter's voice. "Are you being good for Papa?"

"Mmmhmm. Papa said he's gonna take me for ice cream tonight,

okay? The 'nilla kind.”

“Yes, silly girl. You go have your ice cream with Papa. Me and Daddy will be home real soon.”

Jake's father came on, and they talked about Sierra for a while. When they were finished, Jamie fell silent. There were details about what had happened to Jake that didn't make sense. “Okay.” She sucked in a slow breath. “I have two questions.”

“Sure.” The man must've been sitting near Sierra, because Jamie could hear her giggling. “Ask me anything.”

“Why would Jake have left the group and gone back downstairs to the truck?” A frustrated huff slipped from between her lips. “That doesn't sound like Jake at all.”

“What's your second question?”

“Why wasn't he in his turnouts? I mean they were fighting the worst fire of their lives, and Jake wasn't in uniform? It doesn't make sense.”

Jamie heard Jake's father leave whatever room he'd been in and move to a quieter place.

“I've thought about that. I know Jake as well as I've ever known any firefighter in my life. I spent a few years on the job with him, remember, and you get a feel for these things. But with Jake, of course, it's even more because he's my son. He's a part of me. Not just his technique and skill, but the way he thinks, the way he moves on a call.”

“So tell me.” Jamie's entire being was focused on Jim Bryan's words. No matter how many ways she'd looked at the situation, it didn't add up.

“Okay, first ... we know Jake went up into the tower on the main stairwell, Stairwell B. That's the only one of the three sets of stairs in the building that goes straight from the top to the bottom.”

“Right. Captain Hisel told me about that.” Clearly, Jake's father had thought this through. He didn't hesitate as he continued.

“The way I see it, the men from Engine 57 were probably halfway up to the sixty-first floor when someone going down the stairs got into trouble.

Heart pains maybe, exhaustion, panic. Whatever it was, the person couldn't keep walking."

"Jake would've been the first to help." Jamie was beginning to understand. She'd never actually thought it through like this, because she couldn't get past the idea of Jake leaving Larry. It was something he'd never done before.

"Right. And immediately, Larry would've done the same. But at that point Jake wouldn't have known the building was in trouble, so what would he have done? He would've told Larry to go on without him."

"But why? The two of them always stayed together."

"Because, Jake would've intended to take the victim downstairs, and then catch up with the other men. There was no point putting Larry through the extra climb when they only had one victim to carry down the stairs."

A dawning burst in Jamie's soul.

The explanation was perfect! Jake's father was right—the way Jake would've figured it was obvious. They hadn't been at the fire yet. They'd only been on their way up. If they'd been at the fire, Jake would never have left Larry. But if only one of them needed to carry a victim down, Jake would've been the first to volunteer, and he never would've asked Larry to come with him. What reason would there have been? Only one man would've been needed to carry a victim down. Jamie swallowed and tightened her grip on the receiver. "But what ... what about his uniform? He'd completely lost his turnouts when they found him."

"That got me at first, too." Jim Bryan gave a soft chuckle. "Then I remembered something that happened back in 1993. Jake and I were two of the last firefighters who responded to the bombing at the World Trade Center. The fire was out, but as a precaution, we walked up the stairs, making sure people were handling the evacuation okay. We walked up fifty floors that day checking each stairwell, looking for stranded office workers who'd given up or collapsed. Jake said something on the way back down that I just remembered yesterday morning."

Jamie waited, anxious for the rest of the story. She glanced at Jake. He was unmoved, unchanged. His chest fell in a gentle rhythm, but he showed no signs of waking up.

Jim Bryan chuckled again. "On the way back down, Jake kept wanting to take off his turnouts."

"Why?" Jamie still didn't understand.

"Because once you've walked fifty flights in a suit that heavy, you're pretty well exhausted. On the way back down, we knew we were out of danger. All Jake wanted to do was take off the turnouts and bound down the stairs two at a time. In the uniform, we had to pace ourselves."

"So you think ..."

"I think Jake had a victim on his back, and after a few flights, he realized there was a better way to go about it. He probably slipped out of the stairwell at one of the floors, set the victim down, and took off his turnouts. Then he would've put the victim over his back again and continued down the rest of the way."

The notion made perfect sense. "He could've found the turnouts again on the way back up so he'd be ready to fight the fire."

"Exactly." Jim's tone changed. "Only he never got the chance. He was probably out near the truck helping the victim when the building collapsed."

"So ... if that's the explanation, I wonder what happened to the person he saved."

"Maybe he was taken away by ambulance." Jim Bryan paused. "Or maybe he was buried in the rubble. I'm guessing that if Jake hadn't gone over to the truck, he might've been buried too. Jake's the only one who'll be able to tell us."

"If he remembers." Jamie had already shared the doctor's concerns with Jake's father.

"Yes ... I guess we won't know until he wakes up."

They ended the conversation and Jamie stared at Jake. It had been an

hour since anyone had entered the room, and she was sleepy. Still, she kept her eyes on Jake, whispering to him, coaxing him to surface from the deep place where he was sleeping. She clutched tightly to the fingers on his right hand.

“Guess what? I just talked to Sierra. She wants you to come home. Your dad's with her right now, but the doctor says it won't be long. You're doing a lot better.” She studied him. His face was still bandaged because of the burns. Only now, what with the surgery, his short dark hair had been shaved, and his head was wrapped even bigger than before. She ran her tongue along her lower lip. “We're all pulling for you, Jake.”

She no sooner had his name out of her mouth when she felt his fingers move. “Jake?” This time she didn't whisper. The danger that too much stimulation might make his brain swell had long since passed, so she didn't need to keep her voice down. “Jake, honey, can you hear me?”

A moan came from deep in his chest, and then it stopped. *False alarm*, Jamie told herself. But what if it wasn't? “Jake ... wake up! It's Jamie, honey. I'm right here waiting for you.”

Again he made a moaning sound, only this time his head moved an inch or two in each direction. Jamie jumped to her feet. It was happening, Jake was waking up! She rushed into the hallway and waved at a nearby nurse. “Quick ... get Dr. Cleary. My husband's coming to!”

Jamie felt so wonderful she darted back into the room and barely felt her feet touch the ground. If Jake woke up now, if he had his memory and his health, the doctor would have to peel her off the ceiling. The idea was more than she could hope for.

She came up to Jake's side and took his hand again. He was still moaning, still moving about. First his head and shoulders, then his feet and legs. His injured left ankle was in a cast now, one that would stay on for six weeks. But otherwise, Jake's body was fairly healthy. The burns would heal quickly. Dr. Cleary had said so.

The only questions were about Jake's brain.



“Jake ... can you hear me?”

He blinked, opening his eyes only the slightest bit. He looked like someone peering into the sun for the first time after spending a week underground. “Mmmmmm.” The moan was louder now, more distinct, and Jamie's heart soared. He was trying to talk!

“I'm here, Jake.” She was still standing, grasping his knee with her right hand and squeezing his fingers with the left. “You're doing great. Can you hear me, honey?”

He blinked wider this time and squinted, looking around the room until he found her. And the most terrifying realization hit Jamie. He was looking at her without even the slightest bit of recognition.

They were Jake's eyes, for sure. Same shade of blue, same eyelashes. But since Jake was a boy, his eyes had lit up when they found her, every single time they saw each other.

Until now.

Now, as Jamie stared at Jake, there was no love, no sparkle, no pool of shared memories. Nothing at all. What had the head injury done to him? What if he was different now, changed. She banished the thought as quickly as it came. He wasn't changed. He was dazed and hurt, and he needed to heal. He'd suffered a head injury, after all. What did she expect? “Jake? Honey, can you hear me?”

Footsteps echoed in the hallway, and Dr. Cleary's voice sounded above a handful of others. The doctors were coming. They needed to see him, of course, but not yet. She wanted to know for herself first just exactly what Jake remembered. And what he'd forgotten when the south tower slammed him beneath the fire truck.

He was still looking at her, the blank stare giving her a pain in her stomach. She tried one more time. “Jake ... can you hear me?”

Her husband's lips parted and came together again. Then in a burst of determination he opened his mouth a fraction wider and said the thing that must have been troubling him since he woke up. The thing that brought her

world down around her and made her wonder if life between them would ever be the same again.

“Who ...” he said, his words slow and parched. “Who is Jake?”

## Sestien

13 September 2001

Jamie wil daar wees wanneer Jake sy oë oopmaak.

Dis Donderdagoggend en sy was nog nie weer by die huis sedert sy twee dae gelede hospitaal toe gekom het nie. Waar sy langs Jake se bed waak, probeer sy om nie te dink aan wat reg oor New York en in die geleedere van die New Yorkse brandweerdepartement afspeel nie. Jake se pa het ná die ineenstorting van die torings ingery stad toe en Jamie by die hospitaal gekry.

“Ek sal by Sierra bly,” het hy gesê toe hy die middag ry. “Ek sal bly vir so lank jy my nodig het, Jamie.” Hy het weer na Jake gekyk. “Hy sal oukei wees. Ek kan dit voel.”

Jamie het hom ’n drukkie gegee, dankbaar oor die sprankie hoop en krag wat sy teenwoordigheid bring, iets wat sy desperaat nodig het. Namate die tyd aanstap en Jake nie wakker word nie, vererger Jamie se vrees, maar Jake se pa is positief.

“Hou moed.” Jake se pa het haar op die voorkop gesoen toe hy uit is. “Jake het jou nodig. Hy gaan regkom.”

Jamie se gevoelens was in ’n warboel. “Al die mense wat vermis word ... ek kan nie ... ek kan nie ophou om daaraan te dink nie.”

’n Skaduwee het oor Jim Bryan se gesig geval. “Dis baie meer as wat ’n mens jou kan voorstel.”

Die daaropvolgende ure en dae het uit klein roetines bestaan. Sit langs Jake, kry ’n bietjie geslaap, word wakker, was haar gesig by die klein wasbak in Jake se hospitaalkamer, bel Sierra, praat met Jake se pa en gaan neem dan weer haar plek langs haar man se bed in.

Woensdagmiddag het hulle nog ’n CT-skandering gedoen en ’n opbou van vloeistof naby die beseerde gedeelte van Jake se brein ontdek. Hulle het hom dadelik teater toe geneem en die oortollige vloeistof gedreineer. Die operasie was ’n sukses en het voorkom dat Jake se brein deur die drukking beskadig word. Daardie nag het sy nie ’n oog toegemaak nie, maar ure lank op die stoel langs Jake se bed gesit en probeer verstaan wat gebeur het.

Die dodetal was teen daardie tyd bekend.

Driehonderd-drie-en-veertig brandweermanne het in die ineenstorting van die World Trade Center vasgeval. Reddingswerkers is steeds ononderbroke besig om die puin te fynkam, oortuig daarvan dat daar nog mense in die gate onder die oppervlak vasgekeer is. Maar dit word by die uur onwaarskynliker dat

enigiemand lewend gevind sal word.

Dit voel soos 'n leeftyd gelede dat Jamie haar oor die dood van 'n enkele brandweerman ontstel het. Tien per jaar, twintig per jaar. Elke lewe was 'n geweldige verlies. Maar daardie getalle sal nooit vergelyk met dit wat op 11 September gebeur het nie. Haar enigste behoud is om op haar onmiddellike omgewing te fokus – om met die dokters en verpleegsters te gesels, met Jake te praat, hom aan te moedig om wakker te word, haarself te herinner om te eet. Op onbewaakte oomblikke word sy deur die verskriklike beelde geteister van brandweermanne wat by die Twin Towers instorm. Het enige van hulle kon raai wat sou gebeur? Het hulle geweet dat elke trappie hulle nader aan hulle dood sou bring?

Sedert Dinsdag het sy nie weer van Sue gehoor nie, maar sy is seker dat die ander mans van Enjin 57 nie opgespoor is nie. Kaptein Hisel het al twee maal kom inloer – Dinsdagaand en toe weer Woensdag. By albei geleenthede het hy Jamie die nuus gegee wat sy gevrees het. Die mans word steeds vermis en is waarskynlik iewers onder die tonne puin begrawe.

“As hulle nog lewe, glo ons dat hulle dit sal maak,” het Hisel vir haar gesê. “Hulle is sterk mans, almal in uitstekende toestand. Die reddingswerkers dink daar kan nog areas wees waar mense op hulp wag. Van die water wat op die smeulende puin gespuut is, het dalk by hulle uitgekom. Dit kan hulle moontlik aan die lewe hou.”

Jamie het die man laat praat, maar sy het nie geluister nie. Nie regtig nie. Wie probeer hy om die bos lei? As Enjin 57 naby die een-en-sestigste vloer was toe die suidelike toring neergestort het, sal hulle liggame in die middel van die hoop puin wees. Daar bestaan nie die geringste kans dat hulle oorleef het nie. Maar Jamie het net geknik en geïnteresseerd gelyk. Hulle het niks buiten hulle hoop gehad nie.

Sedert Hisel se vorige besoek moes Jamie af en toe die begeerte onderdruk om op hoogte van die nuusgebeure te kom. Die hele nagmerrie wil haar oorweldig, en hoe meer sy daaraan dink, hoe minder kan sy aan enigiets anders dink. Daar is net een manier waarop sy die aaklige beelde uit haar gedagtes kan weer, waarop sy kan ontslae raak van die tonele van honderde brandweermanne in die geboue oomblikke voordat hulle ineengestort het.

Deur doodstil te sit en Jake te sien asemhaal.

Sy hou sy vingers vas, streel met haar duim oor sy verbindende hand, en gesels fluisterend oor alles waaraan sy dink. Soms praat sy oor die ou dae toe hulle nog kinders in dieselfde woonbuurt op Staten Island was. Of oor die manier waarop hulle lewe sedert Sierra se koms in 'n wonderwerk verander het. Dis net deur na Jake te kyk dat sy haarself kan oortuig hy het wel die verskriklike verwoesting by die World Trade Center oorleef. Terwyl honderde brandweermanne se gesinne tans besig is om te treur, is sy een van die gelukkiges. Haar man lewe.

Twee dokters het met haar kom praat. Dr. Cleary, 'n sagmoedige man met 'n vertroostende stem, het Jake se toestand in leketerme aan haar verduidelik. Sy

het reeds geweet dat hy 'n hoofbesering het. Maar dr. Cleary het haar van bykomende inligting voorsien, besonderhede wat haar sal help om die herstelproses te verstaan wanneer Jake wakker word.

Die dokter het verduidelik dat Jake harsingskudding opgedoen het, dat sy linkerenkel gebreek is en dat hy tweedegraadse brandwonde op sy gesig en arms opgedoen het. Hy het waarskynlik naby die brandweerwa gestaan toe die suidelike toring inmeaargestort het. Waarom hy daar was terwyl die res van sy eenheid in die gebou was, is onduidelik. Hoe dit ook al sy, dis moontlik dat die geweld waarmee die toring ineengestort het hom onder die wa ingeslinger het.

“Hy het nie sy uniform aangehad nie, en dit kan om verskeie redes wees,” het dr. Cleary vir haar gesê. Hy het 'n stoel nadergetrek en haar reguit in die oë gekyk, vasbeslote om haar te help om die onmiddellike probleem te hanteer. Hy het sy arms gevou en vervolg. “Maar ons weet dat hy sy skoene in die slag verloor het. Dit alleen vertel ons dat ons met 'n taamlik beduidende hoofbesering te kampe het. Ons het hom swaar verdoof toe hy hier aangekom het – om te keer dat sy brein swel. Daardie gevaar is nou verby, trouens ... die sedasie en die operasie het waarskynlik sy lewe gered.”

Die dokter het sy lip vasgebyt en geaarsel. “Ongelukkig het die trauma gemaak dat hy nou in 'n koma is.”

“Maar ... hy sal weer bykom, nê?” Jamie het nie die ander opsies oorweeg nie. Dat hy vir altyd in die koma sou bly, of moontlik vir die res van sy lewe in 'n hospitaalbed binnears gevoed sou moes word. Sy het geril en die skielike naarheid geïgnoreer.

“Sy breinaktiwiteit lyk goed, en die klein bietjie swelling wat hy gehad het, is besig om mooi te sak.” Dr. Cleary het vriendelik geglimlag. “Ek vermoed dat hy hierdie week een of ander tyd gaan bykom.”

Die dokter het die ergste nuus vir Woensdagmiddag gehou. Hy het Jake se lewenstekens nagegaan en toe weer oorkant haar kom sit. “Mev. Bryan, ons is nogal besorg oor Jake se geheue.” Hy het gefrons en na sy aantekeninge gekyk. “Die personeel van ongevallen sê jou man het nie geweet waar hy was voordat hy sy bewussyn verloor het nie.”

Dit was die eerste keer dat Jamie hiervan hoor. Haar moed het in haar skoene gesak en sy het probeer dink wat om te sê. “U bedoel ... sy totale geheue? Soos ... wat word dit nou weer genoem ... ?”

“Amnesie. Ja, dis 'n moontlikheid.” Die dokter het gesug. “Hoofbeserings kan beslis geheueverlies veroorsaak. Die vraag is in watter mate, en vir hoe lank.” Hy kyk weer na sy notas. “Hier staan dat hy nie sy vriend Larry kon onthou nie ... en dat Enjin 57 niks vir hom beteken het nie. Sou u sê dat dit van belang is?”

Van belang? Jamie voel hoe die bloed uit haar gesig loop. Sy slaan haar arms om haar lyf en knak vooroor asof om die vrees te keer wat haar wil oorweldig. Het Jake nie geweet wie Larry is nie? Of dat hy deel van Enjin 57 was nie? Jamie se stem is bewerig, asof sy haar wind uit geval het. “Is ... is u seker?”

“Ek is.” Die dokter kyk vol empatie na haar. “Die aantekeninge is baie duidelik. Ons hoop dit was net ’n tydelike geheueverlies, en dat hy alles sal onthou wanneer hy bykom. Ons sien dit soms met harsingskudding. Maar daar is ’n moontlikheid van langer amnesie. Ek dink net dis nodig dat u daarvan weet.” Hy het effens vorentoe geleun. “Hy is dus veronderstel om te weet wie Larry is? En waar Enjin 57 inpas?”

Jamie het haar oë gesluit. Haar hart het al hoe vinniger geklop en sy kon nie asemhaal nie. Dr. Cleary het na haar gekyk, vir haar antwoord gewag. “Ja, natuurlik. Hy is ’n gebore brandweerman, Dokter. Sy pa was een en nou is hy een. Dis al wat hy ooit geken het.” Sy probeer asemhaal, maar dit laat haar net nog angstiger voel. “Larry is sy ... sy beste vriend. Hulle het saam in Enjin 57 gewerk. Jake moes ... hy moes dit in sy slaap geweet het.”

Dr. Cleary se oë het na Jake beweeg en hy het ’n oomblik na hom gekyk. “Daar was iets wat hy gesê het wat dalk ’n goeie teken is, iets wat dalk beteken dat sy geheueverlies nie volkome of selfs permanent sal wees nie.”

Jamie se hande het begin bewe. Sy het gewag terwyl die dokter deur sy aantekeninge geblaai het. “Wat het hy gesê?”

“Hier is dit.” Hy het direk van sy aantekeninge af gelees. “Voordat die pasiënt sy bewussyn verloor het, het hy ’n paar keer die naam ‘Sierra’ uitgeroep.”

Jamie se oë het vol tranes geskiet en haar hart het gejubel. Jake het Sierra onthou! Die dokter het afgagtend na haar gekyk, maar sy kon skaars sy gelaatstrekke uitmaak. Jake het dalk nie geweet wie Larry was of waar Enjin 57 ingepas het nie, maar hy het sy kosbare dogtertjie onthou. “Sierra is ... sy’s ons dogtertjie.”

“ Mooi.” Die dokter het geglimlag. “Dis wonderlik.” Hy het sy kop skeef gehou en weer na Jake gekyk. “Trouens, daar is ’n moontlikheid dat hy glad nie geheueverlies gaan hê wanneer hy wakker word nie. Ons sal moet kyk wat gebeur. Hy het ’n taamlik harde hou teen die kop gekry. Enigiets is moontlik.” Nou is dit Donderdagoggend en Jamie is al ’n halfuur lank wakker, lank genoeg om te weet dat Jake se toestand onveranderd is. Sy loop deur die kamer en gaan staan voor die venster. Die uitsig word deur ’n ander gebou belemmer, en dis onmoontlik om enigiets wys te word buiten die feit dat die nag gekom en gegaan het. Jamie gaan staan weer langs Jake se bed en hou aan die reling vas. *Word wakker, my lief ... asseblief...*

Sy wag en bestudeer sy gelaatstrekke noukeurig. Maar daar is geen verandering nie, geen aanduiding dat hy ooit uit hierdie koma gaan wakker word nie.

Haar oë val op die muurhorlosie en sy loop om die bed na die telefoon toe. Sierra sal al wakker wees en Jamie mis haar vreeslik. Sy gaan sit op die stoel langs Jake se bed en skakel die nommer.

Sierra antwoord na die tweede lui. “Hallo?”

Jamie maak haar oë toe en voel hoe haar mondhoë lig. “Hallo, my skat, hoe gaan dit met Oupa?”

“Goed.” Sy klink klein en bekommerd. “Wanneer gaan Mamma en Pappa

huis toe kom?”

“Amper, my skat. Ons wag net dat Pappa wakker word, dan kom ons huis toe, oukei?”

“Ek bid vir Pappa, Mamma. Die hele tyd. Oupa sê die Here is besig om Pappa elke dag ’n bietjie beter te maak.”

Jamie ignoreer die opmerking. As Jake een of ander tyd uit hierdie hospitaal loop, is dit nie omdat God dit toegelaat het nie. Wat dan van Larry? Larry was ook lief vir die Here. Hoekom het God hom in die suidelike toring laat doodgaan? Daar moet honderde ander mense in soortgelyke situasies wees, en baie van hulle is gelowiges wat getrou tot Hom bid. Vir wat? Vir die vyftig-vyftig-kans om te lewe of dood te gaan, afhangende van waar jy Dinsdagoggend negeuur gestaan het?

“Mamma?”

“Ja, my liefste, ek’s hier.” Sy konsentreer op haar dogtertjie se stem. “Is jy ’n soet kind vir Oupa?”

“Mmm-mm. Oupa sê hy gaan vanaand vir my roomys koop, oukei? Wittes.”

“Dit klink na ’n groot bederf. Jy en Oupa moet lekker roomys eet. Ek en Pappa kom ampertjies huis toe.”

Jake se pa neem die telefoon en hulle gesels vir ’n rukkie oor Sierra. Toe hulle klaar is, raak Jamie stil. Daar is sekere besonderhede rondom Jake se situasie wat nie sin maak nie. “Nou goed.” Sy trek haar asem in. “Ek het twee vrae.”

“Natuurlik.” Haar skoonpa sit seker by Sierra, want Jamie kan haar hoor giggel. “Vra my enigiets.”

“Hoekom sou Jake die groep los en weer na die brandweerwa toe gegaan het?” Sy blaas haar asem gefrustreerd uit. “Dit klink glad nie soos iets wat Jake sou doen nie.”

“Wat is jou tweede vraag?”

“Waarom was hy nie in sy uniform nie? Ek bedoel, hulle het met die grootste vuur van hulle lewe te kampe gehad, en Jake was nie in sy uniform nie. Dit maak nie sin nie.”

Jamie kan hoor hoe haar skoonpa opstaan en na ’n stiller vertrek beweeg.

“Ek het daaraan gedink. Ek ken Jake beter as enige ander brandweerman wat ek al ooit geken het. Ek het destyds mos ’n paar jaar saam met hom gewerk, en dan kry jy ’n aanvoeling vir hierdie soort goed. Maar met Jake is dit soveel te meer, want hy is my seun. Hy is deel van my. Nie net wat sy tegniek en vaardighede betref nie, maar sy manier van dink, die manier waarop hy ’n situasie hanteer.”

“Vertel my.” Jamie se hele wese is op Jim Bryan se woorde ingestel. Maak nie saak uit hoeveel hoeke sy na die situasie kyk nie, dit maak nie sin nie.

“Nou goed, eerstens weet ons dat Jake met die hooftrapkuil, Trap B, in die gebou opgegaan het. Dis die enigste een van die drie trapkuile in die gebou wat van bo tot onder gaan.”

“Ja, kaptein Hisel het my daarvan vertel.” Dis duidelik dat Jake se pa hieroor gedink het. Hy aarsel nie voordat hy verder praat nie.

“Hoe ek dit sien, was die mans van Enjin 57 waarskynlik halfpad op pad boontoe toe hulle iemand teëgekom het wat in die moeilikheid was. Hartkrampe, ooreising, ’n paniekaanval. Wat dit ook al was, die persoon kon nie verder loop nie.”

“Jake sou die eerste een wees wat die persoon sou help.” Jamie begin verstaan. Sy het nooit só daaraan gedink nie, want sy het bly worstel met die idee dat Jake sonder Larry daar weg is. Dis iets wat hy nog nooit voorheen gedoen het nie.

“Ja. En Larry sou dadelik dieselfde gedoen het. Maar op daardie tydstip het Jake nie geweet dat die gebou in die moeilikheid was nie. Hy het tien teen een vir Larry gesê om solank sonder hom aan te gaan.”

“Maar hoekom? Hulle het altyd bymekaar gebly.”

“Want Jake sou van plan wees om die slagoffer ondertoe te neem en dan weer by res van die groep aan te sluit. Dit sou sinneloos wees om Larry saam te sleep as daar net een slagoffer was wat gedra moes word.”

Daar gaan ’n lig vir Jamie op.

Dit maak sin! Jake se pa is reg – dis logies dat Jake die situasie só sou hanteer. Hulle was nog nie by die brand nie. Hulle was nog op pad boontoe. As hulle by die brand was, sou Jake nooit sonder Larry iewers heen gegaan het nie. Maar as net een van hulle nodig was om ’n slagoffer ondertoe te neem, sou Jake die eerste een wees wat aangebied het, en hy sou Larry nooit gevra het om saam met hom te gaan nie. Hoekom sou hy? Net een man was nodig om die slagoffer ondertoe te dra. Jamie sluk en verstyf haar greep op die gehoorstuk. “Maar wat ... wat van sy uniform? Hoekom het hy dit nie meer aangehad toe hulle hom gekry het nie?”

“Dit het my ook nogal aan die dink gehad.” Jim Bryan gee ’n sagte laggie. “Toe het ek iets onthou wat destyds in 1993 gebeur het. Ek en Jake was twee van die laaste brandweermanne wat op die bomaanval in die World Trade Center gereageer het. Die brand was reeds geblus, maar as ’n voorsorgmaatreël het ons met die trappe opgegaan om seker te maak die mense hanteer die ontruiming goed. Ons het daardie dag vyftig vloere geklim, elke trapkuil nagegaan en gekyk of ons enige verlore werknemers kry wat moed opgegee of inmekaargesak het. Op pad ondertoe het Jake iets gesê wat ek gister eers onthou het.”

Jamie wag, gretig om die res van die verhaal te hoor. Sy kyk na Jake. Hy lê nog presies soos netnou. Buiten die effense deining van sy borskas, is daar geen teken van enige aktiwiteit nie.

Jim Bryan gee nog ’n laggie. “Op pad ondertoe wou Jake die hele tyd sy uniform uittrek.”

“Hoekom?” Jamie verstaan nog steeds nie.

“Want nadat jy vyftig stelle trappe in so ’n swaar uitrusting geklim het, is jy gedaan. Op pad ondertoe het ons geweet dat ons buite gevaar was. Al wat Jake wou doen, was om van die uniform ontslae te raak en die trappe twee-twee kaf te draf. In die swaar klere moes ons stadiger beweeg.

“So Pa dink ...”

“Ek dink Jake het ’n slagoffer op sy rug gehad, en na ’n paar stelle het hy besef dat daar ’n beter manier was om te werk te gaan. Hy het tien teen een vinnig by een van die vloere uitgeglip, die slagoffer neergesit en sy uniform uitgetrek. Daarna kon hy vinniger vorder.”

Die verklaring maak heeltemal sin. “Hy sou op pad boontoe weer sy uniform aantrek sodat hy gereed vir die brand sou wees.”

“Presies.” Jim se stem verander. “Maar hy het nooit die kans gehad nie. Hy was waarskynlik nog buitekant besig om die slagoffer te help toe die gebou neergestort het.”

“As dit die verduideliking is, wonder ek wat van die persoon geword het wat hy gered het.”

“Dalk is hy deur ’n ambulans weggeneem.” Jim Bryan bly stil. “Of dalk is hy onder die puin begrawe. Ek dink as Jake nie onder die brandweerwa was nie, sou hy dalk ook begrawe gewees het. Jake is die enigste een wat vir ons sal kan sê.”

“As hy onthou.” Jamie het Jake se pa van die dokter se vrees vertel.

“Ja ... ons sal seker eers weet wanneer hy bykom.”

Hulle groet en Jamie kyk na Jake. Dit is ’n uur sedert enigiemand in die kamer was, en sy is vaak. Maar sy hou haar oë op Jake, fluister vir hom, smeeke hom om vanuit die diep plek waar hy slaap, terug te kom. Sy hou sy regterhand se vingers styf vas.

“Raai wat? Ek het nou net met Sierra gepraat. Sy wil hê jy moet huis toe kom. Jou pa is op die oomblik by haar, maar die dokter sê dit gaan nie meer lank wees nie. Dit gaan elke dag beter met jou.” Sy bestudeer hom. Sy gesig is steeds verbind. Maar nou, na die operasie, is sy kort donker hare afgeskeer en is daar nog dikker verbande om sy kop as voorheen. Sy lek oor haar onderlip. “Almal dink aan jou, Jake.”

Sy het net sy naam gesê, toe sy Jake se vingers voel beweeg. “Jake?” Hierdie keer fluister sy nie. Die gevaar dat oorstimulasie sy brein sal laat swel, is verby; dus kan sy maar hard praat. “Jake, liefste, kan jy my hoor?”

’n Kreun kom diep uit sy bors, en dan hou dit op. *Vals alarm*, sê Jamie vir haarself. Maar sê nou dit is nie? “Jake ... word wakker! Dis Jamie, my skat. Ek wag vir jou.”

Hy kreun weer, maar hierdie keer beweeg sy kop effens heen en weer. Jamie spring op. Uiteindelik, Jake is besig om wakker te word! Sy hardloop uit en waai vir ’n suster in die gang. “Gou ... gaan roep dr. Cleary. My man is besig om by te kom!”

Dit voel vir Jamie asof sy sweef toe sy haar weer na Jake toe haas. As hy nou wakker word, as hy sy geheue en gesondheid terugkry, gaan haar beker oorloop. Dis amper meer as waarop sy kon hoop.

Toe sy langs hom is, neem sy weer sy hand. Hy kreun steeds terwyl hy rusteloos beweeg. Eers net sy kop en skouers, dan sy voete en bene. Sy beseerde linkerenkel is nou in gips en dit sal eers oor ses weke afkom. Maar



andersins het Jake nie ernstige beserings nie. Die brandwonde sal vinnig genees. Dr. Cleary het so gesê.

Die enigste vrae is oor Jake se brein.

“Jake ... kan jy my hoor?”

Sy oë knipper baie effentjies oop. Hy lyk soos iemand wat vir die eerste keer in die son kom nadat hy ’n week onder die grond was. “Mmmm.” Hy kreun harder en Jamie se hart sweef. Hy probeer praat!

“Ek’s hier, Jake.” Sy plaas haar regterhand op sy knie en gee sy vingers ’n drukkie met haar ander een. “Jy vaar fantasties. Kan jy my hoor, my skat?”

Hy knip sy oë ’n bietjie groter oop en kyk deur skrefiesoë om hom rond. Toe hulle uiteindelik op Jamie tot rus kom, word sy deur die mees skrikwekkende besef getref. Hy kyk na haar sonder die geringste sweem van herkenning.

Dis ongetwyfeld Jake se oë. Dieselfde blou skakering, dieselfde wimpers. Maar sedert Jake ’n seuntjie was, het sy oë opgehelder wanneer hulle in hare kyk, elke keer wanneer hulle mekaar gesien het.

Tot vandag.

Jake kyk met oë sonder liefde, sonder vonkel, sonder ’n sweempie herkenning na haar. Sy oë is leeg. Wat het die hoofbesering aan hom gedoen? Sê nou hy is nie meer dieselfde nie; sê nou hy het verander? Sy verwerp die gedagte onmiddellik. Hy is nie anders nie. Hy is net in ’n dwaal en seer, en hy moet gesond word. Hy het immers ’n hoofbesering opgedoen. Wat het sy verwag? “Jake? Liefste, kan jy my hoor?”

Daar is naderende voetstappe in die gang en sy kan dr. Cleary se stem bo dié van ’n paar ander hoor. Die dokters is op pad. Dis vanselfsprekend dat hulle hom moet sien, maar nie nou nie. Sy wil eers self weet wat Jake presies onthou. En wat hy vergeet het toe die suidelike toring hom onder die brandweerwa ingeslinger het.

Hy kyk steeds met ’n pynigende, leë uitdrukking na haar. Sy probeer ’n laaste keer. “Jake ... kan jy my hoor?”

Haar man se mond gaan oop en weer toe. Toe maak hy sy mond ’n fraksie groter oop en vra die vraag wat hom moes gepla het sedert hy wakker geword het. Die vraag wat haar wêreld rondom haar in duie laat stort en haar laat wonder of die lewe tussen hulle ooit weer dieselfde gaan wees.

“Wie ... ” sê hy, sy woorde stadig en hees. “Wie is Jake?”

# Chapter SEVENTEEN

SEPTEMBER 13, 2001

Almost nothing made sense anymore.

Jake, if that was his name, had figured out he was in a hospital. But for the past few hours, the only thing he'd been able to hear was the unfamiliar voice of a woman. A pleasant voice he'd never heard before in his life.

She talked to him constantly, even though his eyes were closed and he couldn't move. There was no question the woman was worried about him, but then that was understandable. He was worried about himself. The thing that seemed strange was that she kept calling him Jake, and talking about their house, and his father, and their little girl.

Out of everything she'd said that day, only one name brought to mind a face. The name Sierra. He could picture her as clearly as ... well, as anything.

And it was with that understanding that he knew something was very wrong. Now that he was finally able to make his mouth work, he'd voiced his single most frightening question to the pretty dark-haired woman standing beside him. Who was Jake? Her face went from hopeful to horrified. But that didn't help answer his question, so he tried again. "Who's Jake?"

A pair of doctors walked into the room, and the woman turned to them. Jake couldn't make out what she was saying, but whatever it was, she was upset. He wanted to shout at them. *Hey ... what about me?* He had no idea who he was, and *they* were upset? He felt like a crazy person, as if he'd woken up on a planet he didn't recognize.

He had a terrible headache, but otherwise everything seemed to move all right. His left ankle was in a cast, and there were bandages on his arms. He lifted both hands over his head and used his uncovered fingers to feel

his face and scalp. They were covered too. He must've been in an accident, a car accident maybe. That must be it. But why couldn't he remember his name? And why wouldn't anyone answer him about this Jake person? Was that supposed to be him? A name that wasn't in the least bit familiar?

The trio was still whispering halfway across the room. He raised his voice and spoke so they could hear him. "Will someone ... answer me? Who's Jake?" His words were coming more easily now, but they were still painfully slow and raspy. "This ... is a hospital?"

One of the doctors looked past the woman and smiled at him. The man nodded at his partner, and both of them made their way over to his bedside. The woman stepped aside and leaned against a wall. Her face was pale and her eyes looked red and watery.

"Yes, this is a hospital." The younger doctor had taken the closest position. "I'm Dr. Cleary, and this is my partner, Dr. Hammond. You've been—"

"What happened?" His voice was suddenly loud and rude, but he didn't care. At first it felt like some kind of dream, as if maybe he was merely having trouble waking up. But now things were starting to feel weird. Really weird. He didn't know his name, didn't know Jake, and he'd never seen the woman at the back of the room. But clearly the woman knew him. It was the most unsettling feeling he'd ever had.

Dr. Cleary hesitated. "You were in an accident."

"Yeah ... I got that." He rubbed his head and winced. His body felt like it had been trampled by wild horses. The throbbing in his head made it hard for him to think straight. Talking was an all-out effort. "Did I ... did you operate?"

"We did. You're healing up very nicely."

"How long?" He looked around the room, and met the woman's gaze. As quickly as he could, he tore his eyes from her. "How long ... have I been here?" The doctor shared a glance with his partner, and Jake had the distinct feeling they weren't telling him everything.

“Three days. They found you beneath your fire truck, Jake. Your head was hurt, and your face and arms were burned.”

“Burned?” He was too stunned to say anything else, though a hundred questions fought for position in his mind.

“You were lucky. Nothing worse than second-degree. In six months or so it’ll be hard to see your scars.”

The information was coming too fast. Jake narrowed his eyes, and nausea hit him like a sledgehammer. What had the doctor said? “I have a fire truck?”

Dr. Cleary smiled. “Not you, exactly. It’s the one you and the men from your unit travel in when you take calls.”

*The doctor was crazy, that had to be it.* “You mean I’m a fire-fighter?”

“Yes, Jake.”

This time the doctor’s smile faded, and the room was perfectly silent. From her place against the wall, the woman was no longer watching him. She hung her head and seemed to study something on the floor near her feet. For a moment, the doctor checked back at the woman, and Jake guessed that she had provided this information. The doctor shifted his position, and his eyes found Jake’s again.

“You’ve always been a firefighter. It’s all you’ve ever done.”

Jake’s mouth hung open. “I’m not a fireman, and I ... my name’s not Jake.” He covered his eyes for a minute, each word deliberate. His voice was so hoarse it took everything to make himself heard. The tension in his head was getting worse. Why couldn’t he remember anything? The entire scene was like something from a psychotic ward. “I’m not Jake.”

The woman covered her mouth and stifled a cry, then she ran from the room. Dr. Cleary watched her go and made a move in her direction, then changed his mind. He turned back to Jake, but this time Dr. Hammond cut in first. “Okay, if you’re not Jake, then who are you? Give us your name, and we’ll do what we can to help you.”

He thought about the question, but for the first time since he’d woken

up, he had no answer. He knew he wasn't Jake, and he'd certainly never fought fires. But then who was he? "I ... I'm not sure."

Dr. Hammond gave a slow nod of his head. "Are you a businessman? Do you work in Manhattan?"

"Manhattan?" The word felt familiar on his tongue, but he wasn't a businessman. The notion felt completely foreign to him. "Where's Manhattan?"

The doctors exchanged a quick look, and Dr. Cleary took over again. "In New York City. It's the business district."

"No." He shook his head. "That's not right ... I don't work there."

Dr. Cleary nudged his partner and motioned for him to leave. He dropped his voice to a whisper, but Jake could hear him anyway.

"Make sure she's okay, will you?"

The other doctor nodded and left the room. When he was gone, Dr. Cleary turned back to Jake and gave him an understanding look. "I know this is hard for you, Jake. The memory can take a pretty tough blow when a person has trauma to the brain. Let's try a few more questions, okay?"

"No." He wanted to put the pillow over his head and go back to sleep. Maybe that would give his brain time to work right again. "I just want ... to be normal."

"I realize that. We're doing everything we can to help you." He hesitated. "Just a few more questions."

He clenched the muscles in his jaw, and his face stung. "Fine." He gave a frustrated huff. "Ask."

"Are you married?"

It wasn't meant to be a trick question, but his mind went completely blank. He glanced at his left hand and held it up. "I have a wedding ring."

"Okay, good. But do you remember anything about your wife or your marriage?"

"So *I am* married?" Jake started to feel cold. A shiver passed over him and his teeth chattered. "Was ... was that woman in here ... is she my

wife?"

Dr. Cleary nodded. "She's ready to help you, Jake. She loves you very much."

The conversation might as well have taken place between two strangers. The skin on Jake's face felt like it was on fire, and his head hurt no matter how much pain medicine they gave him. But he had to figure out who he was. Even if it took every bit of the energy he had left. It was unthinkable that the questions coming from his mouth were his own. His name was Jake ... he was a firefighter, happily married to a woman he didn't even recognize. He had no choice but to work through the pain until at least something made sense.

Jake licked his lips and realized they were swollen and cracked. "Were ... were we happy?"

"Your wife says you were very happy. You spent every free moment together."

"Doing what?" His teeth clicked against each other and he shook.

"Would you like a blanket, Jake?"

"Yes, sir."

The doctor disappeared out the door and returned in less than a minute with a blanket. He spread it over Jake, and a warmth made its way through his body. The doctor looked at him. "Do you know where you live?" The man's voice had a serious tone, as though the question was a difficult one, and he didn't really expect an answer.

Jake's heart ricocheted around beneath his rib cage. Where did he live, anyway? Was it New York? Or Florida? Maybe Michigan or San Francisco. His face stung deep to the core of his being, and his head throbbed. How was he supposed to answer questions when he could barely draw the next breath?

"I'm sorry ..." The doctor was waiting. "Maybe this is too much for now. We can try again—"

"Could ..." Jake interrupted him. He winced at the effort each word

cost him. "Could you give me ... choices?"

"Cities, you mean?"

Jake gave a slight nod. "Maybe ..." His tone was impatient again. If only the pain in his head would let up. "Maybe something ... will sound familiar."

"Okay." Dr. Cleary had a clipboard, and he held it to his chest, his head cocked. "New York?"

He shook his head, barely moving it an inch in either direction. "Not New York."

"Los Angeles?"

"No."

"Tell you what, I'll give you a list, and when you hear something that sounds familiar, let me know."

He hated this. What was wrong with his brain that he couldn't even remember where he lived or who he was? And worse, what if he never found out? Panic bubbled up in him, and for a moment he had a strong desire to flee, run as fast as he could and find a bench somewhere. Then he could sit down and wait until everything made sense.

But he was hooked up to a dozen monitors and tubes, and his ankle was in a cast, so running wasn't an option. Besides, it wouldn't help. "Fine." His voice was gruff and laced with frustration. He was thirsty, and tired, and his mouth was pasty dry. "Please ... give me the list."

"Boston ... Detroit ... Santa Fe ... Colorado Springs ... Phoenix ..." Dr. Cleary paused and raised his eyebrows. "Anything?"

"No ... nothing." Sweat broke out along his brow as he waited for more possibilities.

"Staten Island ... Seattle ... Portland ... Oklahoma City ..." The doctor hesitated. "Did anything come to mind when I said Staten Island?"

"Water." He moaned and his eyes closed.

The doctor blinked. "Water?"

"Please."

Dr. Cleary took the plastic pitcher from beside Jake's bed and held the straw up to his lips. He drew in a steady stream of water and winced at the way it hurt to form his mouth around the straw. Two more sips and the doctor set the pitcher back on the table. Jake settled back against his pillows.

“Staten Island, Jake. Did that make you remember anything?”

“No ... nothing. I have no idea where I came from.” He sucked in a slow breath. “Or who I am.” He closed his eyes and willed himself to remain calm. When he opened them, he gazed out the window. “This is scary stuff, Doc.” His words were coming a bit easier. “Isn't there something you can give me? A pill ... something that would help me remember? I feel like I'm crazy.”

“There's no pill for this, Jake. Just time.” The doctor gave him a concerned look. “Is there anything ... anything you remember about your life before today?”

He closed his eyes and thought as hard as he could. The action was like looking through a dense cloud of fog. He could make out nothing, absolutely nothing. He concentrated again until ...

Something began to take shape in the vast emptiness, but at first he couldn't tell if it was a person or a flower. It was something, and in a few seconds he could see the face of a little girl with long curly hair. A name came to mind with the picture, a name he could practically see scribbled on the inside of his eyelids.

“Yes.” He opened his eyes and stared at the doctor. “When I think hard enough, I can see a little girl, long curly hair.” He bit the inside of his lip and willed away the burning around the outside of his mouth. “I ... I can't quite make out her eyes. She isn't old ... maybe four or five.”

The doctor seemed happy with this latest bit of information. But his enthusiasm did nothing for Jake, because he had no idea who the child was. Just that she was familiar to him. “I'm not sure if it's her name.” He motioned to the water, and the doctor gave him another sip. The sweaty



feeling was going away, but his world was still upside down. "I keep seeing the word 'Sierra.' I see it whenever I see her picture in my head."

"Very good. Your memory isn't completely gone."

"Am I supposed to know her?"

"Yes." The doctor gave him a half smile. "She's your daughter."

Jake blinked twice. His daughter? He had a daughter? Whenever had he become a father? And who was the child's mother? Why couldn't he remember anything about the little girl except her face and her name? The anger was back. "This is crazy." Tears stung at his eyes, and he pursed his lips, ignoring the pain the action brought. "I have to know who I am."

"Let's see if this helps." The doctor's voice was slow and deliberate without a trace of humor. "Your name is Jake Bryan, and you're married to Jamie. The two of you have known each other since middle school, back when you lived in the same Staten Island neighborhood." He glanced at his clipboard and appeared to be reading some notes. "Your father was a firefighter, a chaplain, and all you've ever wanted to do is fight fires. You joined the FDNY, New York's Fire Department, when you were just out of school, and you married Jamie the year after that. You live in a house given to you by Jamie's parents, who died in a car accident when you were much younger. Four years ago you and Jamie became the parents of Sierra Jane." The doctor paused, the corners of his mouth lifted just a little more. "The two of you are very close. At least that's what Jamie says."

Jake's head was spinning.

He was drowning in an ocean of pain and fear, and now he felt like a secret agent. One who'd just been handed a new identity, and for whom only Sierra's name and face were familiar. Nothing else about what the doctor had just told him struck even the simplest chord in his memory. But then, maybe he had no memory. Just an empty shell of a brain, somehow able to function and talk, but without the ability to remember anything worthwhile.

But it wasn't the doctor's fault. And nothing the man could say was

going to make the truth any easier to grasp. He looked up at Dr. Cleary. “Thanks, Doc. I ... I need some time to myself, if that's okay. In about ten minutes you can send in that wom—” He stopped for three full seconds and cleared his throat. The effort did no good—his voice was still little more than a raspy whisper. “My ... my wife. Send her to me later, okay?” His anger was fading now. There was no point being mad at the doctors or the pretty brunette. They were only trying to help him.

“Very well.” The doctor nodded and left his room.

When he was gone, Jake clenched his fists and pressed them over his eyes. Tears tried to build there, but he wouldn't let them. Something like this needed time, not tears. Lots of time all by himself so he could figure out who he was. He'd been robbed of his very self, and he needed hours, days maybe, to sift through his losses and grieve; time to make an inventory of all the empty places in his brain. Something terrible had happened to him, and now every memory, every recognition that had been a thread in the tapestry of his persona, had been stolen from him. Every single memory.

Just to be sure, he did another inventory. For nearly five minutes, he thought as hard as he could about his childhood, his school days, his firefighting history, his life with this ... this Jamie woman. His experience as a father. But no matter where he parked his brain, the results were the same.

His house of memories had been robbed blind.

He still had questions, like what were the chances his memories would magically return to him? And how was he supposed to work a job he no longer knew anything about? But those questions could wait. For now there was a bigger question looming among all the others, one that he had asked early in his discussion with the doctor, but had never gotten an answer to.

What had caused this?

Maybe the woman—his wife—would tell him. Whatever it was, the

trauma of it must have been very bad, too bad to talk about. The doctors had obviously avoided telling him the details. What if he'd been driving the fire truck and killed someone? The possibilities were too frightening to imagine.

There was a noise at the door, and Jake let his hands relax and fall back to his side. It was the woman. She wasn't tall, but she had long legs and she looked fantastic in her worn-out jeans and red T-shirt. Her face was a creamy white, and her brown eyes took up almost half of it. What was he supposed to say to her? Until this week they'd been friends or lovers since they were in middle school. Wasn't that what the doctor had said?

She crossed the room slowly and set her shaking hands on the rail of his bed. "Jake ... I know you don't remember me."

He swallowed and tried to maintain eye contact with her. There was a depth in her eyes that couldn't be measured, and that's what made the moment so difficult. He couldn't look at her the same way she looked at him; it was impossible. Not without the memories they apparently shared. Jake waited for her to continue.

"Anyway ..."

Her voice was thick, and he guessed she was doing everything she could to keep from breaking down. The sight of her made his heart soften. If only he could dredge up one single memory about her. Maybe then the others would come rushing back, and he could take this woman in his arms and love away her sadness. But no matter what they'd told him, for now this Jamie person was nothing more than a stranger.

She shook her head as if she was trying hard to keep her composure. "What I'm trying to say is, I'm here for you, Jake." She smiled, even as her chin trembled. "As long as it takes, I'll help you remember who you are, what we have together. I promised you that a long time ago at our wedding, and the promise is still true today." She took hold of his hand, lifted it to her lips, and kissed it. "I love you, Jake. I always will."

The kiss stirred something in him, but it wasn't a memory. His fingers

stiffened some. He pulled his hand gently from her and let it fall back onto the hospital bedsheet. "Thank you."

"Would ... would you like me to bring Sierra up tonight?" Jamie looked suddenly awkward, and she took a step backwards. "She's dying to see you."

Something about the little girl's name brought relief and recognition to him in a way that was priceless. "Please."

He softened his tone some and managed a partial smile. This woman, this Jamie who was supposed to be his wife, deserved his kindness. Her touch might confuse him, but her heart was easy to read, and it represented no threat. Besides, in a few days he would no doubt go home with her, back to a house he couldn't picture, one that was full of a history that no longer existed for him.

If he was ever going to find his memory, she would have to lead the search. "Jamie ..." Her name felt completely foreign on his lips. "Thank you."

Her eyes welled up with tears as she started to back away. "Dr. Cleary says you need some sleep."

He nodded. His head hurt worse than when he first woke up, and he was too tired to move. "Yes."

"Okay, then ..." Jamie lifted one hand and gave him a sad little wave. "See you in a few hours."

When she left the room, he realized something. She must have been sitting beside him, waiting for him to wake up for most of the past three days. Whatever had happened to him, she was probably glad he was alive, anxious to talk to him. And now he didn't even remember her.

No wonder she was crying.

He felt himself being sucked into a deep sleep again, and as he drifted he realized he hadn't asked Jamie about the accident. Where was it and who was involved? Was anyone else hurt? Darkness clouded in around his eyes, and they fell shut, too heavy to keep open. Whatever it was, he could ask

her about it that night. Then at least he'd have answers ... answers and something else. A person he could see and hold and hug. A person whose name and face he actually remembered.

His little Sierra.

## Sewentien

13 September 2001

Amper niks maak meer sin nie.

Jake, as dit regtig sy naam is, weet dat hy in 'n hospitaal is. Maar al wat hy die afgelope paar ure kon hoor, was die onbekende stem van 'n vrou. 'n Mooi stem wat hy nog nooit voorheen gehoor het nie.

Sy het die hele tyd met hom gepraat, selfs al was sy oë toe en kon hy nie beweeg nie. Daar bestaan geen twyfel dat die vrou bekommerd oor hom is nie, maar dis te verstane. Hy is ook bekommerd oor homself. Wat vreemd is, is die feit dat sy hom aanhou Jake noem, en oor hulle huis en sy pa en hulle klein dogtertjie gesels.

Uit alles wat sy gesê het, is daar net een naam wat 'n gesiggie na vore bring. Die naam Sierra. Hy kan haar duidelik voor hom sien.

En dis hierdie insig wat hom laat besef dat daar groot fout is. Noudat hy uiteindelik kan praat, het hy sy mees angswekkende vraag aan die mooi, donkerkopvrou langs hom gevra. Wie is Jake? Die hoop op haar gesig het in afgrise verander. Maar dit het nie sy vraag beantwoord nie; dus probeer hy weer. "Wie's Jake?"

Twee dokters maak hulle verskyning en die vrou draai na hulle. Jake kan nie uitmaak wat sy sê nie, maar hy kan hoor dat sy ontsteld is. Hy wil op hulle skree. *Hei ... wat van my?* Hy het nie die vaagste idee wie hy is nie, en *hulle* is ontsteld? Hy voel soos 'n mal mens, asof hy op 'n planeet wakker geword het wat hy nie herken nie.

Hy het 'n verskriklike hoofpyn, maar andersins voel dit nie of daar groot fout is nie. Sy linkerenkel is in gips en daar is verbande om sy arms. Hy bring albei hande na sy kop en gebruik sy vingers om aan sy gesig en kopvel te vat. Dit is ook verbind. Hy moes in 'n ongeluk gewees het, 'n motorongeluk dalk. Dis seker hoekom hy hier is. Maar waarom kan hy nie sy naam onthou nie? En waarom wil niemand hom antwoord oor hierdie Jake-persoon nie? Is dit veronderstel om hy te wees? 'n Naam wat vir hom geen betekenis het nie.

Die trio staan steeds naby die deur en fluister. Hy span hom in en praat harder sodat hulle hom kan hoor. "Sal iemand ... my antwoord? Wie's Jake?" Sy woorde kom nou makliker, maar steeds pynlik stadig en sy stem is hees. "Is dit ... 'n hospitaal?"

Een van die dokters kyk verby die vrou en glimlag vir hom. Die man knik vir

sy kollega en albei kom staan by sy bed. Die vrou leun teen die muur. Haar gesig is bleek en haar oë rooi en tranerig.

“Ja, jy is in die hospitaal.” Die jonger dokter staan naaste aan hom. “Ek’s dr. Cleary en dit is my kollega, dr. Hammond. Jy was ...”

“Wat het gebeur?” Sy stem is skielik hard en ongeskik, maar hy gee nie om nie. Aanvanklik het dit soos ’n soort droom gevoel, asof hy bloot gesukkel het om wakker te word. Maar nou begin alles eenaardig voel. Vreemd. Hy weet nie wat sy naam is nie, weet nie wie Jake is nie, en hy het nog nooit hierdie vrou gesien nie. Maar dis duidelik dat sy hom ken. Hy het nog nooit so ontsenu gevoel nie.

Dr. Cleary huiwer. “Jy was in ’n ongeluk.”

“Ja ... ek kan dit voel.” Hy vryf oor sy kop en gryns. Dit voel asof ’n trop wilde perde oor sy lyf is. Die kloppende pyn in sy kop maak dit moeilik om helder te dink. Dit verg al sy inspanning om te praat. “Het ek ... het julle geopereer?”

“Ons het. Jy is besig om baie mooi gesond te word.”

“Hoe lank?” Hy kyk om hom rond en ontmoet die vrou se oë. Hy kyk so gou moontlik weer weg. “Hoe lank ... is ek al hier?” Die dokter en sy kollega kyk vinnig na mekaar, en Jake het ’n besliste gevoel dat hulle hom nie alles vertel nie.

“Drie dae. Hulle het jou onder jou brandweerwa gekry, Jake. Jou kop het seergekry en jou gesig en arms het brandwonde opgedoen.”

“Brandwonde?” Honderde vrae dring hulle aan hom op, maar hy is te geskok om enigiets anders te sê.

“Jy was gelukkig. Jy het slegs tweedegraadse brandwonde opgedoen. Oor ses maande behoort dit moeilik te wees om jou littekens te sien.”

Die inligting kom te vinnig. Jake vernou sy oë; hy is skielik naar. Wat het die dokter gesê? “Het ek ’n brandweerwa?”

Dr. Cleary glimlag. “Nie heeltemal nie. Dis die een wat jy en die res van jou eenheid gebruik wanneer julle uitgeroep word.”

*Die dokter het nie al sy varkies op hok nie, dis wat dit is. “Jy bedoel ek is ’n brandweerman?”*

“Ja, Jake.”

Die dokter se glimlag vervaag en dis doodstil in die vertrek. Die vrou kyk nie meer na hom nie. Haar kop hang en sy kyk na iets op die vloer voor haar voete. Vir ’n oomblik kyk die dokter oor sy skouer na haar, en Jake aanvaar dat hulle die inligting by haar gekry het. Die dokter verskuif sy gewig na sy ander been en kyk weer na Jake.

“Jy was nog altyd ’n brandweerman. Dis al wat jy nog ooit gedoen het.”

Jake se mond hang oop. “Ek’s nie ’n brandweerman nie ... en my naam is nie Jake nie.” Hy maak sy oë toe terwyl hy elke woord met nadruk sê. Sy stem is so hees dat hy hom moet inspan om homself hoorbaar te maak. Die spanning in sy kop raak erger. Hoekom kan hy niks onthou nie? Die hele toneel is soos iets uit ’n gestig. “Ek’s nie Jake nie.”

Die vrou maak haar mond toe en smoor 'n kreet voordat sy haastig uitloop. Dr. Cleary kyk haar agterna en dit lyk of hy haar wil volg, maar hom dan bedink. Hy draai weer na Jake, maar hierdie keer is dit dr. Hammond wat praat. “Nou goed, as jy nie Jake is nie, wie is jy? As jy jou naam vir ons gee, sal ons kyk wat ons kan doen om jou te help.”

Hy dink oor die vraag, maar vir die eerste keer sedert hy wakker geword het, het hy nie 'n antwoord nie. Hy weet hy is nie Jake nie, en hy het definitief nog nooit 'n brand geblus nie. Maar wie is hy? “Ek ... ek's nie seker nie.”

Dr. Hammond knik stadig. “Is jy 'n sakeman? Werk jy in Manhattan?”

“Manhattan?” Die woord klink bekend, maar hy is nie 'n sakeman nie. Die gedagte voel nie eens vaagweg bekend nie. “Waar's Manhattan?”

Die dokters kyk vinnig na mekaar, en dr. Cleary neem weer oor. “In New York. Dis die besigheidsdistrik.”

“Nee.” Hy skud sy kop. “Dis nie reg nie ... ek werk nie daar nie.”

Dr. Cleary raak aan sy kollega se elmboog en wys hy moet uitgaan. Hy praat in 'n fluisterstem, maar Jake kan hom in elk geval hoor.

“Maak seker dat sy oukei is, sal jy?”

Die ander dokter knik en gaan uit. Toe hy uit is, draai dr. Cleary weer na Jake en gee hom 'n begrypende kyk. “Ek weet dis swaar vir jou, Jake. 'n Mens se geheue kan 'n groot knou kry wanneer die brein getraumatiseer word. Kom ons probeer nog 'n paar vrae, oukei?”

“Nee.” Hy wil die kussing oor sy kop druk en verder slaap. Dalk sal dit sy brein help om reg te kom. “Ek wil net ... normaal wees.”

“Ek verstaan. Ons doen alles in ons vermoë om jou te help.” Hy aarsel. “Nog net 'n paar vrae.”

Sy gesig pyn toe hy op sy kake klem. “As dit moet.” Hy blaas sy asem gefrustreerd uit. “Vra maar.”

“Is jy getroud?”

Dis nie veronderstel om 'n strikvraag te wees nie, maar hy slaan toe. Hy kyk na sy linkerhand en hou dit op. “Ek het 'n trouring.”

“Oukei, mooi. Maar onthou jy enigiets van jou vrou of jou huwelik?”

“So dan is ek getroud?” Jake raak yskoud. Hy ril en sy tande klap opmekaar.

“Was ... was daardie vrou ... is sy my vrou?”

Dr. Cleary knik. “Sy wil jou help, Jake. Sy is baie lief vir jou.”

Die gesprek kon netsowel tussen twee vreemdelinge plaasgevind het. Sy gesig brand soos vuur en sy kop bly die hele tyd seer, maak nie saak hoeveel pynmedikasie hulle hom gee nie. Maar hy moet probeer uitvind wie hy is. Selfs al verg dit sy laaste greintjie energie. Sy naam is Jake ... hy is 'n brandweerman, gelukkig getroud met 'n vrou wat hy nie eens herken nie. Hy kan nie anders as om hom teen die pyn te staal totdat iets, enigiets begin sin maak nie.

Jake lek oor sy lippe en besef dit is gebars. “Was ... was ons gelukkig?”

“Jou vrou sê julle was baie gelukkig. Julle het elke beskikbare oomblik saam deurgebring.”

“En wat gedoen?” Sy tande klap opmekaar en hy bewe.

“Kan ek vir jou ’n kombers kry, Jake?”

“Asseblief.”

Die dokter verdwyn en is binne ’n minuut terug met ’n kombers. Hy gooi dit oor Jake en hy begin stadig warm word. Die dokter kyk na hom. “Weet jy waar julle bly?” Die man se stem het ’n ernstige ondertoon, asof dit ’n moeilike vraag is, en hy nie regtig ’n antwoord verwag nie.

Jake se gedagtes koers hiernatoe en daarnatoe. Waar bly hulle? In New York? Of Florida? Dalk Michigan of San Francisco. Dit voel asof sy gesig aan die brand is en iemand hom met ’n hamer teen die kop geslaan het. Hoe is hy veronderstel om hierdie vrae te beantwoord as hy nie eens gemaklik kan asemhaal nie?

“Ek’s jammer ... ” Die dokter wag. “Dalk is dit te veel vir jou. Ons kan weer later ... ”

“Kan ... ” val Jake hom in die rede. Die inspanning laat hom grys. “Kan jy my keuses gee?”

“Stede, bedoel jy?”

Jake knik effens. “Dalk ... ” Sy stem is weer ongeduldig. As die pyn in sy kop net wil bedaar. “Dalk is daar een ... wat bekend klink.”

“Nou goed.” Dr. Cleary het ’n knyperbord en hy hou dit teen sy bors, sy kop skeef. “New York?”

Hy beweeg sy kop effens na links en regs. “Nee.”

“Los Angeles?”

“Nee.”

“Ek sê jou wat, ek gaan ’n paar opnoem, en wanneer een bekend klink, sê jy my.”

Hy haat dit. Wat is fout met sy kop dat hy nie eens kan onthou waar hy bly of wie hy is nie? En erger nog, sê nou hy vind nooit uit nie? Die pyn borrel en prut in hom, en vir ’n oomblik het hy ’n drang om weg te hardloop en iewers op ’n bankie te gaan sit – waar hy kan wag totdat alles sin maak.

Maar hy is aan ’n spul monitors en pype gekoppel en sy enkel is in gips. Hardloop is dus nie ’n opsie nie. En buitendien, dit sal nie help nie. “Oukei.” Sy stem is bars en gefrustreerd. Hy is dors en moeg en sy mond is kurkdroog. “Asseblief ... noem maar op.”

“Boston ... Detroit ... Santa Fe ... Colorado Springs ... Phoenix ... ” Dr. Cleary bly stil en lig sy wenkbroue. “Enigiets?”

“Nee ... niks nie.” Sweetdruppels vorm op sy voorkop terwyl hy vir meer moontlikhede wag.

“Staten Island ... Seattle ... Portland ... Oklahoma City ... ” Die dokter aarsel.

“Het daar ’n klokke gelui toe ek Staten Island gesê het?”

“Water.” Hy kreun en sy oë gaan toe.

Die dokter knip sy oë. “Water?”

“Asseblief.”

Dr. Cleary tel die plastiekbeker op die bedkassie op en hou die strooitjie teen



sy lippe. Hy teug 'n mond vol water en probeer die pyn ignoreer toe hy sy mond om die strooitjie tuit. Na nog twee slukke sit die dokter die beker weer op die kassie neer. Jake laat sak sy kop teen die kussings.

“Staten Island, Jake. Klink dit enigins bekend?”

“Nee ... Ek het geen idee waar ek vandaan kom nie.” Hy trek sy asem stadig in. “Of wie ek is nie.” Hy maak sy oë toe en forseer homself om kalm te bly. Toe hy dit oopmaak, tuur hy deur die venster. “Dit maak my bang, Dok.” Dis nie meer so erg moeilik om te praat nie. “Is daar nie iets wat julle my kan gee nie? 'n Pil ... iets wat my kan help onthou? Dit voel of ek van my kop af is.”

“Daar is nie medisyne hiervoor nie, Jake. Net tyd.” Die dokter kyk besorg na hom. “Is daar enigiets ... enigiets wat jy van jou lewe voor vandag onthou?”

Hy maak sy oë toe en dink so hard hy kan. Dis soos om deur 'n digte mis te probeer kyk. Hy kan niks uitmaak nie, net mooi niks nie. Hy konsentreer weer totdat ...

In die bodemlose leegheid begin iets vorm aanneem, maar aanvanklik kan hy nie sien of dit 'n mens of 'n blom is nie. Maar daar is iets, en na 'n paar sekondes kan hy die gesig van 'n dogtertjie met lang krulhare sien. 'n Naam kom saam met die gesig by hom op, 'n naam wat hy as't ware aan die binnekant van sy ooglede geskryf sien staan.

“Ja.” Hy maak sy oë oop en staar na die dokter. “As ek hard genoeg dink, kan ek 'n klein dogtertjie met lang krulhare sien.” Hy byt aan die binnekant van sy lip en probeer die brandpyn rondom sy mond ignoreer. “Ek ... kan haar oë nie mooi uitmaak nie. Sy is nog klein ... so vier of vyf.”

Die dokter lyk bly oor hierdie brokkie inligting. Maar sy entoesiasme beteken niks vir Jake nie, want hy het geen idee wie die kind is nie. Net dat sy vir hom bekend is. “Ek's nie seker of dit haar naam is nie.” Hy wys na die water en die dokter gee hom nog 'n sluk. Hy voel nie meer so sweterig nie, maar sy wêreld is nog steeds onderstebo. “Ek bly die woord ‘Sierra’ voor my sien. Ek sien dit elke keer wanneer ek haar gesig in my gedagtes sien.”

“Dis baie goed. Jy het nie totale geheueverlies nie.”

“Is ek veronderstel om haar te ken?”

“Ja.” Die dokter glimlag effens. “Sy is jou dogtertjie.”

Jake knip sy oë twee maal. Sy dogtertjie? Het hy 'n kind? Wanneer het hy pa geword? En wie is die kind se ma? Hoekom kan hy niks van die dogtertjie onthou behalwe haar gesig en naam nie? Sy woede is terug. “Dis malligheid.” Die trane brand in sy oë en hy pers sy lippe opmekaar sonder om hom aan die pyn te steur. “Ek moet weet wie ek is.”

“Kom ek kyk of ek kan help.” Die dokter praat stadig en nadruklik, sy gesig ernstig. “Jou naam is Jake Bryan, en jy is met Jamie getroud. Julle ken mekaar al van laerskool af toe julle in dieselfde buurt op Staten Island gebly het.” Hy kyk na die aantekeninge op sy knyperbord. “Jou pa was 'n brandweerman, 'n kapelaan, en al wat jy ooit wou wees, is 'n brandweerman. Jy het direk na skool by die New Yorkse brandweerdepartement aangesluit en die volgende jaar met Jamie getrou. Julle bly in 'n huis wat Jamie se ouers aan julle bemaak

het. Julie was heelwat jonger toe hulle verongeluk het. Vier jaar gelede het jy en Jamie die ouers van Sierra Jane geword.” Die dokter bly stil en daar is ’n klein glimlaggie om sy mond. “Julle twee is baie na aan mekaar. Volgens Jamie, in elk geval.”

Jake se kop draai.

Hy is besig om in ’n see van pyn en vrees te verdrink, en nou voel dit of hy ’n geheime agent is. Een wat sopas ’n nuwe identiteit moes aanneem. Buiten Sierra se naam en gesig is daar niks wat die dokter gesê het wat eens vaagweg bekend klink nie. Dalk het hy nie eens ’n geheue nie. Net ’n leë dop van ’n brein met die vermoë om te funksioneer en te praat, maar sonder die kapasiteit om enigiets sinvol te onthou.

Maar dis nie die dokter se skuld nie. En daar is niks wat die man kan sê wat die waarheid makliker verteerbaar vir hom gaan maak nie. Hy kyk op na dr. Cleary. “Dankie, Dok. Ek ... ek het ’n bietjie tyd alleen nodig, as dit reg is. Oor so tien minute kan julle daai vrou ...” Hy swyg ’n volle drie sekondes en maak sy keel skoon. Dit help nie – sy stem is steeds kwalik meer as ’n skor fluistering. “My ... my vrou. Stuur haar later na my toe, oukei?” Sy woede is besig om te taan. Dis sinneloos om vir die dokters of die mooi brunet kwaad te wees. Hulle probeer hom net help.

“Ek sal so maak.” Die dokter knik en gaan uit.

Toe hy alleen is, bal Jake sy vuiste en druk dit oor sy oë. Hy kan sy trane voel kom, maar hy weier om te huil. Hy het tyd nodig, nie trane nie. Baie tyd op sy eie sodat hy kan uitvind wie hy is. Hy is van homself beroof, en hy het ure, dalk dae nodig, om deur sy verlies en smart te werk; tyd om die leemtes in sy brein in oënskou te neem. Iets verskrikliks het met hom gebeur, en nou is elke herinnering, alles waaruit die tapisserie van sy menswees bestaan het, van hom gesteel. Elke liewe herinnering.

Net om seker te maak, probeer hy ’n inventaris opstel. Vir amper vyf minute dink hy so hard moontlik aan sy kinderjare, sy skooldae, sy loopbaan in die brandweer, sy lewe saam met hierdie ... hierdie Jamie. Sy ervarings as ’n pa. Maar maak nie saak waarheen hy sy brein stuur nie, die resultate bly dieselfde.

Sy huis van herinneringe is rot en kaal gesteel.

Hy het nog vrae. Wat is die kans dat sy herinneringe uit die bloute sal terugkom? En hoe is hy veronderstel om ’n werk te doen waarvan hy niks meer weet nie? Maar hierdie vrae kan wag. Vir eers is daar ’n groter vraag wat tussen die ander opdoem, een waaraan hy vroeër in sy gesprek met die dokter geraak het, maar waarop hy nooit ’n antwoord ontvang het nie.

Wat het sy geheueverlies veroorsaak?

Dalk sal die vrou – sy vrou – hom kan vertel. Wat dit ook al was, die trauma moes baie erg wees, te erg om oor te praat. Die dokters het duidelik van die besonderhede af weggeskram. Sê nou hy het die brandweerwa bestuur en iemand se dood veroorsaak? Die moontlikhede is eindeloos en skrikwekkend. Daar is ’n geluid by die deur en Jake laat sy hande weer langs hom sak. Dis

die vrou. Sy is nie lank nie, maar sy het lang bene en lyk ongelooflik in haar verslete jeans en rooi T-hemp. Sy het 'n roomwit vel en groot bruin oë. Wat is hy veronderstel om vir haar te sê? Tot nou toe was hulle sedert laerskool vriende of minnaars. Is dit nie wat die dokter gesê het nie?

Sy kom stadig na hom toe en plaas haar bewende hande op die reling langs sy bed. "Jake ... ek weet jy onthou my nie."

Hy sluk en probeer om in haar oë te kyk. Haar oë is eindeloos diep en dís wat die oomblik so moeilik maak. Hy kan nie op dieselfde manier na haar kyk as sy na hom nie; dis onmoontlik. Nie sonder die herinneringe wat hulle skynbaar deel nie. Jake wag dat sy moet vervolg.

"In elk geval ..."

Haar stem is vol ingehoue trane en dit lyk of sy haar bes doen om nie te begin huil nie. Sy hart vermurwe. As hy maar net een herinnering aan haar kan ophaal. Dalk sal die ander dan terugkom en kan hy hierdie vrou in sy arms neem en koester tot al haar hartseer weg is. Maar maak nie saak wat hulle vir hom sê nie, op die oomblik is hierdie Jamie niks meer as 'n vreemdeling nie.

Sy skud haar kop asof sy hard probeer om haar emosies in bedwang te hou.

"Wat ek probeer sê, is, ek is hier vir jou, Jake." Sy glimlag, al bewe haar ken.

"So lank dit nodig is, sal ek jou help om te onthou wie jy is, wat ons saam het.

Ek het dit lank gelede op ons troudag belowe en gaan daarby hou." Sy neem sy hand, bring dit na haar lippe en soen sy vingers. "Ek is lief vir jou, Jake. En sal altyd wees."

Haar soen stuur 'n roering deur hom, maar dis nie 'n herinnering nie. Sy vingers verstyf effens. Hy trek sy hand saggies uit hare en laat dit op die laken terugval. "Dankie."

"Moet ek moet Sierra vanaand bring?" Jamie lyk skielik ongemaklik en sy gee 'n tree terug. "Sy brand om jou te sien."

Iets aan die dogtertjie se naam, die bekendheid daarvan, stuur 'n onskatbare verligting deur hom. "Asseblief."

Hy versag sy stem en slaag daarin om effens te glimlag. Hierdie vrou, hierdie Jamie wat veronderstel is om sy vrou te wees, verdien sy vriendelikheid. Haar aanraking verwar hom, maar haar hart is 'n oop boek, en dit hou geen bedreiging in nie. Oor 'n paar dae sal hy in elk geval saam met haar moet huis toe gaan, na 'n huis wat hy nie ken nie, een met 'n geskiedenis wat nie meer vir hom bestaan nie.

As hy ooit sy geheue gaan herwin, sal sy die soektog moet lei. "Jamie ..."

Haar naam voel heeltemal vreemd op sy lippe. "Dankie."

Haar oë is vol trane toe sy verder terugstaan. "Dr. Cleary sê jy het jou slaap nodig."

Hy knik. Sy kop is seerder as toe hy wakker geword het en hy is te moeg om te beweeg. "Ja."

"Nou ja ..."

Jamie lig haar een hand effens in 'n hartseer totsiens. "Sien jou oor 'n paar uur."

Toe sy uit is, dink hy aan iets. Sy het seker vir amper drie dae langs hom gesit

en gewag dat hy moet wakker word. Wat ook al met hom gebeur het, sy is waarskynlik oneindig dankbaar dat hy lewe en brand om met hom te praat. En nou onthou hy haar nie eens nie.

Geen wonder sy huil nie.

Hy voel hoe hy weer deur 'n diep slaap oorweldig word, en terwyl hy wegraak, besef hy dat hy Jamie nie oor die ongeluk uitgevra het nie. Waar het dit gebeur en wie was betrokke? Het enigiemand anders seergekry? Sy ooglede val toe, te swaar om oop te hou. Hy sal haar vanaand daaroor moet uitvra. Dan sal hy ten minste 'n paar antwoorde hê ... antwoorde en iets waaraan hy kan vasklou. Iemand wat hy kan sien en aanraak en vashou. 'n Mensie wie se gesig en naam hy kan onthou.

Sy klein Sierra.

# Chapter EIGHTEEN

SEPTEMBER 13, 2001

Clay Michaels wasn't sure how much more he could take.

It was Thursday evening, and he and Laura were helping Josh with his homework. Clay had spent every moment with Laura and Josh since Eric disappeared. That's what they were calling it now, a disappearance. Rescue workers hadn't given up hope, and Laura wasn't going to either, but Clay had long since stopped thinking his brother had simply vanished.

The man he'd looked up to since he was a small boy, the brother he admired and loved like a best friend was dead. And not only that, but Eric's marriage had been in trouble, and Clay hadn't done a thing to help. He hadn't even acknowledged how bad things had gotten. The truth about Eric's life was something Clay was desperate to talk about, but other than the conversation they'd shared that first night after the attack, Laura had said nothing. She was too busy believing Eric would call at any minute. And pretending she was right was wearing on Clay almost as much as it was wearing on Laura. But there was nothing he could do about it, no way he could let his guard down and grieve. Because if he gave up hope, Laura would have no choice but to do the same. And right now she was counting on him to not only be there and to be strong for her as well as for Josh, but to be hopeful.

He'd arranged for vacation time the afternoon of the attacks. He had explained the situation, and his police chief had told him to take as much as he needed.

"If we can do anything, let us know," the man had told Clay the day before. "The whole country's reeling."

"Yes, sir. My brother ..." His voice broke, and it took a moment before he could continue. "We were very close."

Josh had gone to school both days since the terrorists' attack, but

Laura was barely holding herself together. They'd been visited by the pastor and several others from church. Each person prayed with them and promised to do what they could to help. The church secretary brought a casserole Wednesday night, and a couple from the mission committee had picked up a pizza for them that afternoon.

By Thursday night Clay had called every hospital, Red Cross center, and rescue mission in the New York and New Jersey areas. "I'm calling from Los Angeles," he'd say. "My brother worked in the World Trade Center south tower, and he's missing. I just wondered if you have any victims not yet identified."

At that point Clay would launch into a description of Eric: six-foot-three, two hundred pounds, short dark hair, a nice-looking face. Blue eyes. But each time the answer was the same. "I'm sorry, all our patients have been identified."

Clay reported his lack of findings to Laura after every call. Most of the time she sat in the same chair looking out the window at a world gone mad, nodding her head as though he were giving her a weather report. But there were times when her shock faded some, and usually when it did, she gave way to fury.

"What was he trying to prove?" she'd yelled earlier that day when Josh was at school. "That he was as dedicated as Allen? That he cared more about their clients than about a national disaster?"

Clay had watched her pace the room. There was nothing he could say, no way he could defend his brother's actions if he had, indeed, stayed in the building working while thousands of others had the common sense to flee. And all for the sake of closing one last deal?

No, there was nothing Clay could say to ease Laura's anger.

But that afternoon her bout of temper had ended in tears. "Why didn't I shake him, Clay? I should've told him a long time ago how I felt. He cared more about work than us. I tried to stop him, tried to tell him he was destroying everything we had." Her eyes held a type of sorrow that was

painful to look at. “I keep thinking maybe I could've done something more, something to keep him home.”

Her shoulders trembled, and Clay wanted to go to her, soothe away her sadness. “You didn't know.”

“But maybe he wouldn't have gone ... maybe he would've done everything in his power to stay home with us.”

When Laura would exhaust the angles of guilt and sorrow, she'd become strangely normal. She'd make her way through the house visiting with her housekeeper, checking her e-mail, and listening to CeCe Winans on the CD player. Whenever she stepped outside even for a moment—to check the mail or water a plant, she would run back in through the door and find Clay. “Did he call?”

But Clay had noticed how that mood never lasted more than an hour. It must've been too much work, and when the façade had cracked at about three that afternoon, Laura spent the next hour crying quietly in the living room chair, staring out the window, as though somehow Eric might pull up any minute.

“He was supposed to come home today, you know ...” She must have repeated the line a dozen times that afternoon. Her denial was so strong that at times Clay was actually afraid for her, not sure if he should take her in for emergency counseling or let her work her way through everything that had happened in the past few days.

Clay watched her now, her face tense as she helped Josh with a math problem at the kitchen table. *She's still waiting for the phone to ring, God ... how long will this last?* He'd been praying for her constantly, as easily as he breathed, but she was acting nothing like herself.

Clay thought he understood why. Losing Eric would just about kill her. He remembered a few things about her past, details she'd shared with him back when they were high school kids together. One memory particularly stood out, a time back then when Laura had given Clay a glimpse of her heart, a glimpse he'd never forgotten.

“All my life, ever since I was taken from my parents, I've felt lucky to have a home.” They had been walking in the hallway after lunch that day, talking about their families. “My adoptive parents are wonderful, but still, I became theirs so late in life that I guess I feel like they're doing me a favor. Like I'm a permanent guest.”

“Come on, Laura.” He kicked at her feet, hoping she would laugh and tell him she was only kidding. “Your family loves you.”

But Laura didn't even smile. “I know that. I love them too. It's not their fault I feel this way. You know what?” She stopped and faced him. “I can't wait to grow up.”

“Why?”

A dreamy look had come over Laura's eyes. “I'll get married and have my own family. My very own.” The corners of her lips had lifted just a bit. “And I'll never feel like a guest again.”

The memory lifted, and Clay leaned back in the kitchen chair, his eyes fixed on Laura. All she'd wanted was a place where she could belong. But she'd gone and fallen in love with Clay's big brother, a man who hadn't had it all together after all. Not if he could choose success and power over being the family man Laura and Josh needed. Before his move to Southern California, he hadn't had any idea that Eric and Laura were having trouble. But after the move the evidence had been hard to miss. The incident at the pizza parlor ... the comments from Josh ... the pain in Laura's eyes. No doubt Eric had let the most important things in his life fall away. And in the process, Laura had wound up in the very position she'd tried to avoid. Living in a home where she couldn't possibly have felt needed or desired, a marriage where she must have realized she would never be anything but second place to Eric's job. Clay could've kicked himself for not saying something back then. While there had still been time.

Eric's money bought her maid service and luxury, but the life they shared wasn't the one Clay had thought they were living. And it was obviously not the dream Laura had hoped for back in high school. In fact,



when Clay listened to Laura spill her heart the other night after Josh had gone to bed, he'd had only one very sad thought.

Married to Eric, she was living in the very role she'd wanted to escape as a teenager. The role of a glorified houseguest.

Clay let his gaze wander, and he took in the lavish surroundings that made up his brother's home. The finest natural stone floors, professionally decorated walls and windows, state-of-the-art lighting. None of it could replace love and companionship. Clay shook his head, but not enough to catch Laura's attention. His brother must've been crazy. All those days and hours and weeks at work when Laura and Josh were right here. What could possibly have been important enough to keep him away?

His eyes fell on a framed photo of Laura and Eric. *I thought you ruled the world, big brother. And all the while you thought happiness rested at the top of some ladder. But it didn't. It never did.* His eyes found Laura again, her face still angled close to Josh's, still caught up in the job of helping him with his homework. Clay worked the muscles in his jaw, his emotions suddenly exposed and raw. *What you were looking for was right here, Eric ... right here with them all the time.*

Laura looked up and gave him a small, grateful smile. "Maybe Uncle Clay can help with that last problem." She tousled Josh's hair. "It's got me beat."

"Sure, buddy." Clay coughed, clearing the lump in his throat. "Bring it over here."

Josh jumped up from the table and squeezed into the seat between Laura and Clay. "Mom says it's kinda hard for third grade." Josh shrugged.

"Well ..." Clay looked up and met Laura's eyes. "Moms are usually right." He pulled the book closer. "Let's see what we can do."

Clay helped Josh figure out the problem, and just as they got the answer, the doorbell rang. For the whisper of a second, Laura's eyes grew wide, and she stood up a little too quickly. Then almost as fast, she slipped into the practiced calm persona and waltzed across the kitchen toward the

front door. Clay and Josh exchanged a look, and Josh shrugged. "Is it my dad?"

The child's words were like a series of knives in Clay's heart. "No, buddy. I think ... I think he'd use a key."

"Oh ..." Josh's expression fell some. "Yeah."

They followed Laura through the living room toward the foyer.

Laura opened the double doors, her expression, her posture, her pace all that of a woman without a care in the world. In fact, watching Laura now, it was impossible to tell that she'd been personally touched in any way by the events of September 11.

"Can Josh come out?" A redhead about the size of Josh stood on the porch. "We're playing catch."

Josh's sad face lifted immediately. "Can I, Mom, please?"

"Sure." She kissed the boy on the top of his head. "Stay out front."

Clay waited three feet from Laura and watched as she closed both double doors and turned to him. Sadness stirred his soul as their eyes locked. He wanted to go to her, take her in his arms and release her from the pretense, tell her it was all right to cry, that they should be crying, in fact, because maybe, just maybe Eric wasn't coming home. Tell her that it was all right to grieve the fact and believe that somehow, someday she'd be okay again. They both would be.

She must've read his thoughts because her smile faded and fear filled her eyes, as though finally the denial was lifting, and suddenly she was face-to-face with the most frightening possibilities in all her life. Her body seemed to shrink as she fell lightly against one of the closed front doors. "I can read your mind, Clay."

He took a step closer and let his shoulder lean against the wall a few feet from her. "What's it saying?"

Laura let her head fall forward. There was silence for a moment as the late summer breeze sifted through the open windows in the vast living room and into the place where they stood. The smell of some kind of

flower hung in the air and mixed with the distant sounds of Josh and his friends playing catch in the front yard.

When she looked up there were tears in her eyes. “You don't think he's coming back.”

Clay felt her pain, felt it wrap around his heart and take his breath away. He said nothing, not just because his throat was too thick to speak, but because anything honest he might utter now would only hurt her more.

Her gaze was direct, unwavering; this time she wanted an answer. “You think he's dead, right?”

“Well ...” His mouth opened, but nothing came out. *Give me the words, Lord ... help me get her through this.* “What do you think, Laura?” He kept his voice low, gentler than the breeze. “Do you really think he's coming home?”

It was the first time he'd tried to reason with her, tried to get her to see the impossibility of her unfounded hope. The question seemed to hit her in stages, and Clay took in each of them as they played across her face. Shock ... anger ... frustration ... and finally a sense of cavernous sorrow and futility. A knowing that all the pretending in the world wasn't going to change the facts.

“No ...”

She took a step back and slid slowly down toward the floor, her shoulder still pressing into the wall. As she hit the floor, a sorrowful sound came from her. It was raw and gut-wrenching, and it became a series of sobs unlike anything Clay had ever heard. As a police officer he'd often been the bearer of bad news, the one who'd rung a family's doorbell in a way that would interrupt their lives forever. He'd held countless devastated friends and family members at the scenes of fatal accidents.

But grief does not follow a pattern, and the weeping coming from Laura was more than a dawning reality that Eric might be dead. It was that, but it was something more, as though she wasn't only grieving the loss of Eric, but the loss of her own life as well. The loss of their marriage, their

family, and all that she and Eric had failed to be.

He went to her, slipped his hands under her arms, and lifted her until she fell into his embrace. "Laura ... I'm sorry."

She buried her head in his chest and held on to his shirtsleeves. Twenty minutes passed while she stayed that way, letting the sobs empty from a place that must have carried them around for far too long. Finally, when he could no longer feel her sobs shuddering against him, she spoke, her voice so broken she could hardly speak. "He ... he isn't coming home, is he?" she said as she tightened her grip on his arms.

He pulled her close again and spoke softly against her hair. "I don't think so."

She pulled back and wiped her fingertips beneath her eyes. They were swollen and bloodshot, and she looked faint, as though she might collapse again. "I kept thinking today was the day. Somehow ... somehow he hadn't been able to get through, but he'd find a way to get home when he was supposed to. On a bus or a train ... something." She drew in a slow, shaky breath. "But if he and Allen were on the sixty-fourth floor ... They're still looking for people, right?"

Clay studied her, but the face he saw wasn't that of a weary, frightened woman facing the death of her husband. It was the face of a girl he'd known since his freshman year in high school. "They haven't found anyone alive in the rubble since yesterday afternoon."

"I know. I guess I just thought ..." She sniffed. "I thought God might give me a miracle. That somehow despite all the evidence, Eric had actually survived."

He smoothed his hands down the lengths of her arms. "I want to believe that too." Clay thought about the news report he'd heard that morning when Laura was in the shower. Apparently, cell phones were ringing deep in the rubble. He hadn't told her. None of the reports said anything about anyone actually answering the calls.

Laura took a few steps back and glanced out the window toward Josh

and his friends. “He missed so much over the years.”

Clay worked the muscles in his jaw. “He should’ve told me.” He hesitated. “You should’ve told me, Laura. I could’ve talked some sense into him.”

“No, Clay.” Laura hugged her arms against her chest and whispered a sad laugh. “If he wouldn’t listen to me, he wouldn’t have listened to you, either.”

“You tried, though ... the two of you?” This new image of Eric still didn’t ring true. As though they were talking about someone else, and not the brother he’d looked up to all his life.

“Yes.” Laura turned back toward him. “After we lost the baby, nothing was ever the same. Over the years, we tried three times since then. Tension would build, I’d force the issue, and we’d have counseling six, maybe eight weeks. For a while things would seem better, but it always came back to his first love.”

The phrase caught Clay off guard. Back when they were young, when their own parents had divorced, Eric would find his mother in the den and reason with her. “Mom ... if God’s your first love, then you have to at least try. You and Dad owe it to each other.”

The words echoed in Clay’s mind. *If God’s your first love ...* He blinked the memory back and searched Laura’s eyes. “His first love?”

She exhaled through her nose and gave a small shrug. “Koppel and Grant, Clay. Always Koppel and Grant.” Laura touched his arm and nodded toward the boys outside. “Go play with him, will you? I need a few minutes by myself.”

“Okay.” He met her eyes once more. “You sure you’re all right?”

She nodded. “I just need a few minutes with God.”

“To pray for Eric?”

“No.” She gave him a smile that stopped short of her eyes. “To ask Him why He took him from me. Before we found a way to work things out.”

Clay reached out, gave her hand a tender squeeze, and left through the front door. He jogged toward the boys playing outside near the street.

“Hey, Josh ... you got room for another rookie?”

“Uncle Clay!” The child's face lit up. He ran to Clay and jumped into his arms before falling back to the ground and racing over to the other boys. “My uncle's gonna play with us. He's so good, you guys won't believe it!”

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Inside the house Laura heard her son's excitement, saw the look on his face as he hugged Clay and led him into an impromptu game of baseball. The tears were gone for now, her eyes and her heart dry as she thought about the possibility. Was it true? Could Eric really be gone, buried in the ruins of the World Trade Center? Without ever finding a way back to the love they'd once shared?

Laura swallowed, and her heartbeat pounded in her temples. Her headache would only be worse after so much crying. She hung her head and closed her eyes. The façade had been for her benefit, hers and Josh's. She'd convinced herself that Eric would call or grab a train or find his way home, but now even that was too much effort. The truth was as clear as air. Unless they found him soon, she wouldn't ever see him again.

If Eric wasn't in one of the hospitals or rescue missions, if he hadn't called her or found a way to get a message sent home, then there was only one other answer. He was somewhere in the pile. Laura hadn't watched TV reports since Tuesday, but she wasn't completely ignorant. She'd watched the tower come down, after all, the force so great it looked like a bomb had gone off. And not just any bomb. But a nuclear bomb, like the one they'd dropped on Hiroshima at the end of World War II.

The truth was, no one could've survived that force. Especially not sandwiched somewhere in the middle of it.

Laura found her favorite chair, the one that faced the front windows and allowed her to stare at the sky and wonder. She sat down, leaned her

head back, and let her eyes get lost in the deep cloudless blue. What could she say to God now? If Eric was dead, then it was too late to ask for help or strength or a miracle. Besides, why would God answer her now. He hadn't answered her prayers that Tuesday morning. She blinked and thought about that. It would've been nothing to a mighty God to alter the course of those planes or cause Eric to leave the building with the others. Eric could've taken his business trip a week before or a week after. God could've foiled the hijackers' plans somehow, or held the buildings up with His bare hands to keep them from falling. But He didn't.

She watched a hawk circle over the chaparral-covered hill that bordered their neighborhood, and she felt the hint of a smile play at the corners of her lips. Eric used to love eagles. *God ... is he dead? Have you taken him home?* She blinked, her eyes dry.

Nothing about prayer seemed natural these days, so she sighed and lowered her gaze to Clay and the boys playing in the street. She clenched her teeth and leaned back into the chair. Forget counseling and stale cures for the things that ailed their marriage. She should've screamed at him, shaken him, demanded that he love her and Josh the way they needed to be loved.

Begged him to stay home from New York.

She glanced up once more. The hawk overhead soared in another circle, this one closer to her hillside home.

*God, I'd do anything for another chance with him. Anything.*

Often, in days past, Laura would feel some sort of response to her prayers, a Scripture that might come to mind, or a whispered word of encouragement echoing deep in her soul. But this time there was nothing. No bits of direction or sense that somehow God had heard her prayer. Only the awful certainty that now, after all her missed opportunities to make a difference with Eric, she'd run out of time. He wasn't going to call or walk through the front door, not now or ever again. Laura felt the familiar sting of tears, and she wasn't sure which hurt worse. The tragedy of what had

obviously happened to Eric, or the loss of all they could've shared in the future.

If only she'd had one more chance.

## Agtien

13 September 2001

Clay Michaels weet nie hoeveel meer hy kan verduur nie.

Dis Donderdagaand en hy en Laura help Josh met sy huiswerk. Sedert Eric se verdwyning het Clay elke oomblik by Laura en Josh deurgebring. Dis hoe hulle nou daarna verwys: 'n verdwyning. Die reddingswerkers het nie moed opgegee nie en Laura is ook nie van plan om dit te doen nie, maar Clay dink lankal nie meer dat sy broer eenvoudig verdwyn het nie.

Die man wat hy sedert sy seuntjiedae verafgod het, die broer wat hy soos 'n beste vriend liefgehad en bewonder het, is dood. Meer nog, Eric se huwelik was in die moeilikheid en Clay het niks gedoen om te help nie. Hy het nie eens aan homself erken hoe sleg dit gaan nie. Clay smag daarna om oor hierdie dinge te praat, maar ná sy en Laura se gesprek daardie eerste aand ná die aanval, het sy niks verder daaroor gesê nie. Sy glo eenvoudig dat Eric enige oomblik gaan bel. En om voor te gee dat sy reg is, is vir Clay amper net so vermoeiend soos vir Laura. Maar daar is niks wat hy daaraan kan doen nie. Hy durf nie nou aan sy hartseer toegee en treur nie. Want as hy hoop opgee, sal Laura dieselfde moet doen. En op die oomblik het sy nie net nodig dat hy vir haar en Josh moet sterk wees nie, maar dat hy moet hoop.

Hy het Dinsdagmiddag sy verlof gereël. Hy het sy situasie verduidelik en sy bevelvoerder het gesê hy kan soveel dae neem as wat nodig is.

“Laat weet asseblief as daar iets is wat ons kan doen,” het die man gister vir Clay gesê. “Die hele land is platgeslaan.”

“Ja, Meneer. My broer ...” Sy stem het gebreek en hy moes 'n oomblik wag. “Ons was baie na aan mekaar.”

Josh het die afgelope twee dae skool toe gegaan, maar Laura is op breekpunt. Die predikant en 'n paar van hulle lidmate het kom inloer. Almal het saam met hulle gebed en aangebied om te help waar hulle kan. Die kerksekretaresse het Woensdagaand 'n eenskottelgereg gebring en 'n paartjie wat saam met haar op die sendingkomitee dien, het vanmiddag 'n pizza kom aflaai.

Teen Donderdagaand het Clay elke hospitaal, Rooikruis-sentrum en reddingsmissie in New York en New Jersey geskakel. “Ek bel van Los Angeles,” sou hy sê. “My broer het in die suidelike toring van die World Trade Center gewerk, en hy word vermis. Ek het net gewonder of daar slagoffers by julle is wat nog nie geïdentifiseer is nie.”

Dan het Clay 'n beskrywing van Eric gegee: 1,9 meter, negentig kilogram,



kort donker hare, 'n aantreklike gesig. Blou oë. Maar die antwoord was elke keer dieselfde. “Ek’s jammer, al ons pasiënte is al geïdentifiseer.”

Na elke oproep het Clay aan Laura verslag gedoen. Die meeste van die tyd sit sy en staar deur die venster na ’n wêreld wat kranksinnig geword het. Dan knik sy asof hy vir haar ’n weerverslag gee. Maar daar is tye dat haar skok vervaag, en dan is dit gewoonlik haar woede wat oorneem.

“Wat het hy probeer bewys?” het sy vroeër vandag gegil toe Josh by die skool was. “Dat hy net so toegewyd soos Allen was? Dat hy meer besorg oor hulle kliënte as oor ’n nasionale ramp was?”

Clay het sit en kyk hoe sy op en af loop. Daar was niks wat hy kon sê om sy broer te verdedig indien die man wel aanhou werk het terwyl duisende ander mense die gesonde verstand gehad het om te vlug nie. En dit ter wille van ’n laaste transaksie.

Nee, daar was niks wat Clay kon sê om Laura se woede te laat afkoel nie.

Maar die middag het haar woedeuitbarsting in trane geëindig. “Hoekom het ek hom nie aan sy skouers geruk nie, Clay? Ek moes hom lank gelede gesê het hoe ek voel. Sy werk was belangriker vir hom as ons. Ek het hom probeer keer, vir hom probeer sê dat hy besig was om alles te vernietig wat ons het.” Dit het seergemaak om soveel hartseer in haar oë te sien. “Ek bly dink dat ek iets meer kon gedoen het, iets om hom by die huis te hou.”

Sy het onbedaarlik gebewe en Clay wou na haar toe gaan en haar troos totdat sy nie meer hartseer was nie. “Jy het nie geweet nie.”

“Maar dalk sou hy nie gegaan het nie ... dalk sou hy alles in sy vermoë gedoen het om by die huis by ons te bly.”

Wanneer Laura haar skuldgevoelens en hartseer uit alle hoeke gedissekteer het, was dit asof sy amper vreemd normaal geword het. Sy het deur die huis beweeg, met die huishoudster gesels, haar e-pos gelees en na haar CeCe Winans-CD geluister. Wanneer sy sou uitgaan, al was dit net om te gaan kyk of daar pos is of ’n plant water te gee, sou sy terughardloop om angstig te vra of Eric al gebel het.

Maar Clay het opgemerk dat hierdie tussenspel nooit meer as ’n uur duur nie. Dis waarskynlik te veel inspanning, en toe die fasade teen drieuur die middag krake toon, het Laura die volgende uur in die woonkamerstoel deurgebring en met traannat wange deur die venster gestaar asof sy Eric enige oomblik terugverwag.

“Hy was veronderstel om vandag terug te kom ... ” Sy het dit die middag seker ’n dosyn keer herhaal. Haar ontkenning is so groot dat Clay bekommerd raak, en hy is nie seker of hy haar vir traumaberading moet neem en of hy haar moet los sodat sy op haar eie deur alles kan werk wat die afgelope paar dae gebeur het nie.

Clay kyk nou na haar waar sy Josh by die kombuistafel met ’n wiskundesom help, haar gesig gespanne. *Sy wag nog steeds vir die telefoonoproep, Here ... Hoe lank gaan dit nog aanhou?* Hy bid konstant, amper onwillekeurig vir haar, maar sy is steeds glad nie haarself nie.

Clay dink hy verstaan. Dit sal haar so te sê vernietig om Eric te verloor. Hy onthou 'n paar dinge uit haar verlede, goed waarvan sy hom vertel het toe hulle saam op hoërskool was. Een herinnering het bo die ander uitgestaan, destyds toe Laura Clay 'n kykie op haar hart gegee het, 'n kykie wat hy nooit vergeet het nie.

“Vandat ek van my ouers af weggeenem is, het ek nog altyd baie gelukkig gevoel dat ek 'n huis gehad het.” Hulle het ná middagete klas toe geloop en oor hulle gesinne gepraat. “My aangenome ouers is wonderlike mense, maar ek het so laat in my lewe by hulle uitgekom dat dit amper voel asof hulle my 'n guns bewys. Asof ek 'n permanente gas is.”

“Kom nou, Laura.” Hy het na haar voete geskop en gehoop sy sou lag en sê dat sy net 'n grap maak. “Jou gesin is lief vir jou.”

Maar Laura het nie eens geglimlag nie. “Ek weet dit. En ek vir hulle ook. Dis nie hulle skuld dat ek so voel nie. Weet jy wat?” Sy het gaan staan en na hom toe gedraai. “Ek kan nie wag om groot te wees nie.”

“Hoekom nie?”

Daar was 'n dromerige kyk in Laura se oë. “Want dan kan ek trou en my eie gesin hê. Net myne.” Sy het halfgeglimlag. “En ek sal nooit weer soos 'n gas voel nie.”

Die herinnering vervaag en Clay ontspan teen die kombuisstoel se rugleuning, sy oë op Laura gerig. Al wat sy wou hê, was om iewers te behoort. Maar toe het sy op Clay se ouer broer verlief geraak, 'n man wat uiteindelik nie so perfek was nie. Nie as hy sukses en mag bo 'n gesinslewe met Laura en Josh gekies het nie. Voordat hy hom in Suid-Kalifornië kom vestig het, sou Clay nooit kon dink dat Eric en Laura probleme het nie. Maar nou dat hy hier is, is dit moeilik om die tekens mis te kyk. Die dag by die pizzaplek ... Josh se opmerkings ... die pyn in Laura se oë. Eric het die belangrikste sake in sy lewe agterweë gelaat, en Laura bevind haar nou in die einste situasie wat sy probeer vermy het. In 'n huis waar sy onmoontlik geliefd en nodig voel, 'n huwelik waar sy besef het dat sy altyd tweede viool na Eric se werk sou speel. Clay kan homself skop omdat hy nooit iets gesê het nie. En nou is dit te laat.

Eric se geld het vir haar 'n huishoudster en weelde gekoop, maar Clay het hom misgis met die lewe wat hulle gelei het. Dis duidelik nie die lewe waarvan Laura destyds op skool gedroom het nie. Trouens, toe Laura nou die aand haar hart uitgestort het nadat Josh bed toe is, het Clay net een baie hartseer gedagte gehad.

In haar huwelik met Eric speel Laura die einste rol waarvan sy as tiener wou ontsnap. Nouliks meer as dié van 'n gas.

Clay se oë dwaal deur die luukse interieur. Die vloere is van die duurste natuurlike klip, die mure en vensters die handwerk van 'n binnenshuise versierder, en die beligting die nuutste op die mark. Maar hier is niks wat liefde en kameraadskap kan vervang nie. Clay skud sy kop, maar nie genoeg om Laura se aandag te trek nie. Sy broer moes van sy kop af gewees het. Hoeveel dae en ure en weke was hy nie by die werk terwyl Laura en Josh net

hier was nie? Wat op aarde kon belangrik genoeg gewees het om hom weg te hou?

*Sy oë val op 'n geraamde foto van Laura en Eric. Ek het gedink jy's so agtermekaar, ouboet. En jy het die hele tyd gedink dat geluk aan die bopunt van die een of ander leer gewag het. Maar dit het nie. Nooit nie. Sy oë dwaal weer na Laura waar sy besig is om Josh met sy huiswerk te help. Clay byt op sy tande, sy emosies skielik oopgevelek en rou. Dit waarna jy so gesoek het, was nog altyd reg onder jou neus, Eric ... hier by jou vrou en kind.*

Laura kyk op en daar is 'n klein, dankbare glimlag om haar mond. "Dalk kan oom Clay jou met hierdie laaste som help." Sy vryf Josh se hare deurmekaar. "Ek weet nie meer nie."

"Natuurlik, grootman." Clay kug om van die knop in sy keel ontslae te raak. "Kom wys vir my."

Josh spring op en wurm hom op die stoel tussen Laura en Clay in. "Mamma sê dis nogal moeilik vir graad drie." Josh haal sy skouers op.

"Wel ... " Clay kyk op en ontmoet Laura se oë. "Ma's is gewoonlik reg." Hy trek die boek nader. "Kom ons kyk wat ons kan doen."

Clay help Josh met die som en hulle het pas die antwoord neergeskryf toe die voordeurklokkie lui. Vir 'n breukdeel van 'n sekonde word Laura se oë groot en sy staan effens te vinnig op. Maar die volgende oomblik het sy weer in die geoefende kalm persoon verander en stap sy deur die kombuis na die voordeur toe. Clay en Josh kyk na mekaar en dan lig Josh sy skouers. "Is dit my pa?"

Die kind se woorde sny soos 'n lem deur Clay se hart. "Nee, grootman. Ek ... ek dink hy sou 'n sleutel gebruik het."

"O ... " Josh se gesig val effens. "Ja."

Hulle volg Laura deur die woonkamer na die portaal toe.

Laura maak die dubbeldeure oop, haar uitdrukking, haar lyftaal, haar stappie dié van 'n onbesorgde, kommerlose vrou. Trouens, soos sy nou daar staan, lyk dit nie asof Dinsdag se gebeure haar enigszins persoonlik geraak het nie.

"Kan Josh kom speel?" 'n Rooikopseuntjie van Josh se ouderdom staan op die stoep. "Ons speel jagertjie."

Josh se gesig verhelder onmiddellik. "Toe, Mamma, kan ek, asseblief?"

"Natuurlik." Sy soen hom op sy hare. "Net nie in die straat nie."

Clay staan 'n paar treë agter Laura toe sy die deure toemaak en na hom toe draai. Die hartseer pluk aan sy hart toe hulle oë ontmoet. Hy wil na haar toe gaan, haar in sy arms neem en sê sy hoef nie meer voor te gee nie. Sy mag maar huil, trouens, sy moet huil, want dalk, net dalk gaan Eric nie terugkom nie. Hy wil vir haar sê dat sy daaroor mag treur en selfs mag glo dat dit eendag beter sal gaan. Met hulle albei.

Dis asof sy sy gedagtes lees, want haar glimlag raak weg en haar oë raak bang, asof die ontkenning uiteindelik padgee en sy skielik voor die mees angswekkende moontlikheid van haar lewe te staan kom. Dit lyk asof sy fisies kleiner word toe sy liggies teen die deur val. "Ek kan sien wat jy dink, Clay."

Hy gee 'n tree nader en leun met sy skouer teen die muur. "Wat dink ek?"

Laura laat haar kop vooroor hang. Dis stil terwyl die laatmiddagbries deur die oop vensters in die ruim woonkamer hulle bereik. Die geur van die een of ander blomsoort hang in die lug en buitekant kan hulle Josh en sy maats in die tuin hoor speel. Toe sy opkyk, is daar trane in haar oë. "Jy dink nie hy gaan terugkom nie."

Clay voel haar pyn, voel hoe dit om sy hart vou en sy asem wegneem. Hy sê niks nie, nie net omdat sy keel te stram is om te praat nie, maar omdat sy net gaan seerkry as hy nou gaan eerlik wees.

Haar blik is reguit, sonder weifeling; hierdie keer wil sy 'n antwoord hê. "Jy dink hy is dood, nê?"

"Wel ... " Sy mond gaan oop, maar niks wil uitkom nie. *Gee my die woorde, Here ... gee my die krag om haar hierdeur te help.* "Wat dink jy, Laura?" Hy hou sy stem sag. "Dink jy regtig hy gaan huis toe kom?"

Dis die eerste keer dat hy met haar probeer praat, probeer om haar die onmoontlikheid van haar ongegronde hoop te wys. Dis asof die vraag haar in fases tref, en Clay sien hoe die emosies oor haar gesig speel. Skok ... woede ... frustrasie ... en uiteindelik iets soos 'n spelonkagtige hartseer en vergeefsheid. 'n Wete dat al die voorgee in die wêreld nie 'n verskil aan die realiteit sal maak nie.

"Nee ... "

Sy gly stadig teen die muur af. Toe sy op die vloer sit, kom daar 'n hartseer geluid uit haar binneste. Dis rou en dierlik, en dit verander in 'n rou gesnik soos Clay nog nie gehoor het nie. As polisieman was hy al dikwels die draer van slegte nuus, iemand wat aan 'n gesin se deur moes klop om hulle lewens permanent te verander. Hy moes al dosyne verpletterde vriende en familieleden by ongelukstonele vashou.

Maar iets soos verdriet volg nie 'n vaste patroon nie, en die gehuil wat nou uit Laura kom, is meer as die besef dat Eric dalk dood is. Dis asof sy nie net oor die verlies van haar man treur nie, maar die verlies van haar eie lewe. Die verlies van hulle huwelik, hulle gesin en alles wat sy en Eric nie kon wees nie. Hy gaan na haar toe en tel haar onder haar arms op totdat sy in sy omhelsing ontspan. "Laura ... ek's jammer."

Sy verberg haar gesig teen sy bors en hou aan sy moue vas. Twintig minute gaan verby terwyl sy só bly en haar trane laat vloei vanuit die plek waar sy hulle veels te lank gedra het. Toe hy haar later nie meer teen hom voel snik nie, begin sy praat, haar stem so gebroke dat sy dit skaars regkry. "Hy ... hy gaan nie huis toe kom nie, nê?" vra sy en verstyf haar greep op sy arms.

Hy trek haar weer nader en praat sag teen haar hare. "Ek dink nie so nie."

Sy staan terug en vee haar wange af. Haar oë is dik en rooi en sy lyk bewerig, asof sy weer op die grond gaan neersak. "Ek het aanhou dink dat vandag die dag gaan wees. Dat hy ... dat hy ons net nie in die hande kon kry nie, maar 'n manier gekry het om by die huis te kom. Op 'n bus of 'n trein ... iets." Sy trek haar asem bewerig in. "Maar as hy en Allen op die vier-en-sestigste vloer was

... Hulle soek nog steeds na slagoffers, nê?"

Clay kyk na haar, maar die gesig voor hom is nie dié van 'n moeë, bang vrou wat met haar man se dood gekonfronteer word nie. Dis die gesig van 'n meisie wat hy al van skool af ken. "Sedert gistermiddag het hulle geen oorlewendes gekry nie."

"Ek weet. Ek het seker net gedink ..." Sy snuif. "Ek het gedink die Here gaan dalk vir my 'n wonderwerk doen. Dat Eric tog, ten spyte van al die getuïenis, op 'n manier oorleef het."

Hy vryf oor haar arms. "Ek wil dit ook glo." Clay dink aan die nuusberig waarna hy die oggend geluister het toe Laura in die stort was. Blykbaar was daar selfone wat diep in die puin gelui het. Hy het haar nie gesê nie. Nie een van die berigte meld of enige van die oproepe beantwoord is nie.

Laura staan terug en kyk deur die venster na Josh en sy maats. "Hy het deur die jare so baie misgeloop."

Clay byt op sy tande. "Hy moes met my gepraat het." Hy aarsel. "Jy moes met my gepraat het, Laura. Ek kon hom tot sy sinne gebring het."

"Nee, Clay." Laura vou haar arms teen haar bors en gee 'n hartseer laggie. "As hy nie na my geluister het nie, sou hy ook nie na jou geluister het nie."

"Maar julle het probeer, nê?" Hierdie nuwe beeld van Eric voel nog steeds onwerklik. Asof hulle oor iemand anders praat, nie die broer waarna hy sy lewe lank opgekyk het nie.

"Ja." Laura draai haar rug na hom. "Nadat ons die baba verloor het, was dinge nooit weer dieselfde nie. Deur die jare het ons drie keer weer probeer. Elke keer wanneer die spanning te veel raak, het ek hom gekonfronteer, en dan het ons vir ses, agt weke vir berading gegaan. Vir 'n rukkie sou dit beter gaan, maar op die ou end het sy eerste liefde altyd tussenin gekom."

Die frase vang Clay onkant. Toe hulle jonk was en hulle ouers op skei gestaan het, het Eric sy ma eendag in die woonkamer gekry en met haar gepraat. "Ma ... as God julle eerste liefde is, moet julle ten minste probeer. Ma en Pa is dit aan mekaar verskuldig."

Die woorde kom nou na hom toe terug. *As God julle eerste liefde is ...* Hy kyk in Laura se oë. "Sy eerste liefde?"

Sy blaas haar asem uit en lig haar skouers 'n fraksie. "Koppel & Grant, Clay. Dit was nog altyd Koppel & Grant." Laura raak aan sy arm en knik na die seuns buite voor die huis. "Wil jy nie saam met hom gaan speel nie? Ek het 'n paar minute alleen nodig."

"Natuurlik." Hy kyk weer ondersoekend in haar oë. "Is jy seker jy's oukei?"

Sy knik. "Ek het net 'n paar minute saam met die Here nodig."

"Om vir Eric te bid?"

"Nee." Sy gee hom 'n glimlag wat nie tot by haar oë kom nie. "Om Hom te vra hoekom Hy hom van my af weggeneem het. Voordat ons 'n manier gekry het om dinge reg te stel."

Clay steek sy hand uit en gee hare 'n sagte drukkie voordat hy by die voordeur uitgaan. Hy draf na die seuns wat voor op die gras speel.

“Hei, Josh ... is daar nog plek in die span?”

“Oom Clay!” Die kind se gesig helder op. Hy hardloop Clay tegemoet en gooi hom in sy arms voordat hy weer op die grond spring en na die ander seuns toe hardloop. “My oom gaan kom speel. Julle sal nie glo hoe goed hy is nie!”

Alleen in die huis hoor Laura haar seun se opgewondenheid, sien sy die uitdrukking op sy gesig toe hy Clay vasgryp en hom by hulle bofbalwedstryd betrek. Haar trane is vir eers weg, haar oë en haar hart leeggehuil terwyl sy aan die moontlikheid dink. Is dit waar? Is Eric regtig iewers onder die puin van die World Trade Center begrawe? Sonder dat hulle die liefde teruggekry het wat daar eens op ’n tyd tussen hulle was?

Laura sluk, en haar hartklop pols in haar slape. Ná al die gehuil gaan haar hoofpyn nog erger wees. Sy laat sak haar kop en maak haar oë toe. Die fasade was ter wille van haarself, vir haar en Josh. Sy het haarself oortuig dat Eric sou bel of op ’n trein klim en huis toe kom, maar nou verg dit te veel inspanning. Die waarheid staan soos ’n paal bo water. Tensy hulle hom vinnig opspoor, gaan sy hom nooit weer sien nie.

As Eric nie in een van die hospitale of reddingsmissies is nie, as hy haar nie gebel het of ’n manier gekry het om ’n boodskap huis toe te stuur nie, is daar net een ander antwoord. Hy lê iewers in daardie hoop puin. Laura het Dinsdag laas televisie gekyk, maar sy is nie heeltemal onkundig nie. Sy het immers gesien hoe die toring met die geweld van ’n bomontploffing ineenstort. Soos dié van ’n atoombom, die een wat hulle aan die einde van die Tweede Wêreldoorlog op Hiroshima laat val het.

Die feit is, niemand sou daardie soort geweld kon oorleef nie. Veral nie iewers in die middel van soveel beton en staal nie.

Laura gaan sit op haar gunstelingstoel, die een voor die venster waarvandaan sy in die lug kan opkyk en wonder. Sy ontspan met haar kop teen die rugleuning en voel hoe haar oë in die diep, wolklose blou wegraak. Wat kan sy nou vir die Here sê? As Eric dood is, is dit te laat om vir hulp of krag of ’n wonderwerk te bid. En buitendien, hoekom sal die Here haar gebede nou verhoor? Hy het haar gebede nie beantwoord toe sy Dinsdagoggend gebed het nie. Sy knip haar oë en dink ’n oomblik daaroor na. Vir ’n groot God sou dit niks wees om daardie vliegtuie van koers af te dwing of te maak dat Eric die gebou saam met die res van die personeel verlaat nie. Eric kon ’n week vroeër of later op sy sakebesoek gegaan het. God kon die kapers se plan op een of ander manier gefnuik het, of die geboue met sy kaal hande regop gehou het om te keer dat dit val. Maar Hy het nie.

Haar oog vang ’n valk wat bo die fynbos-oortrekte heuwel langs hulle woonbuurt sirkel, en ’n glimlag pluk aan haar mondhoeke. Eric was gaande oor arende. *God ... is hy dood? Het U hom huis toe geneem?* Sy knip haar traanlose oë.

Deesdae is gebed nie iets wat natuurlik kom nie. Sy sug en laat sak haar oë na Clay en die seuns wat buite speel. Sy byt op haar tande en sit agteroor. Wat ’n vermorsing van tyd was die berading en afgesaagde raad vir dit wat hulle

huwelik makeer het. Sy moes op hom geskree het, hom geskud het, daarop aangedring het dat hy haar en Josh die liefde gee wat hulle nodig het.

Hom gesmeek het om nie New York toe te gaan nie.

Sy kyk weer op. Die valk sweef steeds in sy sirkel, nou nader aan hulle huis.

*Here, ek sal enigiets doen vir nog 'n kans met hom. Enigiets.*

In die verlede het Laura soms iets ervaar wanneer sy bid, 'n Bybelvers wat by haar opkom of 'n paar vertroostende woorde wat in haar hart gefluister word. Maar hierdie keer is daar niks nie. Daar is nie 'n heenwysing of 'n gevoel dat God haar gebed verhoor het nie. Net die aaklige sekerheid dat dit te laat is, dat sy nooit weer die geleentheid gaan hê om 'n verskil aan haar huwelik te maak nie. Hy gaan nie bel of by die voordeur instap nie, nie vandag of in die toekoms nie. Laura voel die bekende branderigheid agter haar ooglede en sy is nie seker wat die ergste is nie. Die tragedie van wat klaarblyklik met Eric gebeur het, of die verlies van alles wat hulle in die toekoms kon hê.

As sy maar net nog een kans gehad het.

# Chapter NINETEEN

SEPTEMBER 13, 2001

Bringing Sierra to the hospital that night to see Jake took every bit of Jamie's strength. In the end she begged Jake's father to come with her. He'd planned to save his visit for the next day so Jamie and Sierra could have time alone with Jake.

But Jamie was terrified to see him again.

"He didn't know me, Dad. Not at all." Jamie's hands shook, and she could barely think. Anxiety gnawed at her insides. "Come with me, please. I can't go alone. Besides, maybe he'll remember you."

Jim Bryan had agreed, and now he was getting ready. Sierra had dressed herself in the new pink church dress, the one Jake had made such a fuss over just last Sunday. The child was sitting sweetly in the TV room playing with her dolls. Jamie watched her from the kitchen and wanted to join her, sit beside her and tell her everything was going to be okay with her daddy. But she couldn't stop shaking long enough to string a sentence together. Obviously Jake had a brain injury, something terribly wrong. The two of them had known each other forever, it seemed. FDNY shifts were twelve on, twelve off. Jake had gotten day shifts almost from the beginning, and they were never apart for more than a single night.

How could he not know her?

Her mouth was dry and her mind raced. She poured herself a glass of water and emptied it in three gulps. What if his memory never came back? How was she supposed to teach him to love her the way he always had, as far back as she could remember? She bit the inside of her lip and gripped the kitchen counter, looking out over their small backyard. Jake's love was something she had absolutely counted on. He might die, yes, but as long as he drew breath, Jake Bryan would love her. Never in all her hours of worrying had she considered he might get hurt, that a head injury could rob



him of a lifetime of memories they'd built together.

Sierra popped up from the sofa and skipped toward her, the pink dress fluffing softly behind her. "Let's go." She tilted her head and smiled. "I wanna see Daddy."

"As soon as Papa's ready." Jamie exhaled and felt herself grow just a bit calmer. At least Jake's father would be with them. She ran her fingers over Sierra's brow and realized something. She needed to prepare her daughter for what she was about to see. "Honey ... Daddy's at the hospital because he got hurt. You know that, right?"

"Papa said he's at the hos'apul, and his head has an owie."

"Right." Jamie nodded and studied Sierra's eyes. The child had no idea. "But the doctors put lots of bandages on Daddy's head and face. He won't look ..." Her voice caught and she swallowed a sob. "He won't look like he used to."

"You mean because he got a hurt face, too?"

"Yes, sweetie." Jamie pulled Sierra close and hugged her. "But the doctors are making him better." She drew back and locked eyes with her daughter again. "Okay?"

"Okay." Sierra's eyes grew wide and she did a little gulp. "Can he come home with us?"

"Not for a few days."

Footsteps sounded from the other room, and Jim Bryan walked up to them, his eyes narrow, braced in anticipation. It was a look Jake got when he talked about working a tough call, the look he and his father probably both had at any fire. He reached out and gave Jamie's arm a gentle squeeze. "Let's go."

She was grateful beyond words for his presence. It allowed her to think through the situation, to imagine how they were going to survive it. They left the house together, and forty minutes later all three of them walked into Jake's hospital room. He lay flat on the bed, his head still fully bandaged. They filed inside, and Jamie couldn't tell if he was awake.

“Daddy?” Sierra stopped short, her eyes wide.

“Jake ...” Jamie took Sierra's hand and stepped closer to her husband's bed. “Sierra's here.”

At the sound of her name, his eyes blinked open. With small, strained movements, he turned his head and peered at her. All that showed of his mouth was a small opening in the gauze, so it was impossible to tell if he was smiling, if seeing his daughter was enough to jolt some sort of awakening in him. He kept his eyes locked on the girl, and finally he was able to make his lips work enough to speak. “Sierra ...”

Sierra squeezed Jamie's hand and hid partially behind her. She tilted her face up, and Jamie was struck by what she saw there.

The child was scared to death. She'd never seen Jake as anything other than the muscled, active, healthy man he'd been before Tuesday morning.

This man—lying on a hospital bed wrapped in bandages—was someone she not only didn't recognize. But someone who scared her.

“Mommy ” Sierra's voice was a whisper. “What's wrong with him?”

Jim Bryan took a few steps backwards and let them have this moment, the three of them. Jamie tried to find the right words. “Daddy got hurt at work, baby.”

Her little girl eyes became almost perfect circles. “In a fire?”

“Yes, sweetie.” Jamie looked at Jim for help, but he was staring at Jake. Probably as stunned as Sierra at the sight he made there in the hospital bed. “He got hurt in a fire.”

“Then ” Sierra shifted her gaze to Jake and swallowed hard. “I'll pray for him. So he'll get better.”

“Yes, let's do that in a few minutes, okay?” Jamie stepped closer and looked down at her husband. “How're you feeling?”

His eyes met hers, but it was impossible to make out his expression. “My face stings.”

“I'm sorry.” Seconds of silence felt like hours, and Jamie searched for

something to say. Finally, she reached back and motioned for Jake's father to come alongside her. He was hesitant, but finally he took his place on the other side of Sierra.

Jamie looked back at Jake. "I brought your dad."

Jake blinked and moved his head enough to see Jim Bryan. "You're my dad?"

"Hello, son." Jim took Jake's hand, his eyes glistening. "Everything's going to be fine."

"I'm your son?" Jake stared up at Jim.

Jake looked as fearful as Sierra, and Jamie wanted to jolt herself, make herself wake up from the nightmare they were suddenly thrust into. It wasn't happening ... it couldn't be. Jake would never not know her ... or his father. It was impossible.

"Yes, Jake." Jim Bryan nodded as a single tear made its way down his weathered cheek. "I'm your dad."

"Oh." Jake stared at him for another few seconds and then let his gaze fall back to Sierra.

When she realized that Jake was looking at her, she must've decided to be brave. She peeked out from behind Jamie and touched her small fingers to Jake's hand. "Hi, Daddy."

"Hi." Jake's eyes were flat.

"Is Jesus going to make you better?"

He gave a quick glance at Jamie and his father. "I hope so."

Jamie's knees felt weak. How must it feel to Jake, lying there unable to recognize any of them except Sierra? And why Sierra? Why not her, when he'd loved her forever? How could he remember one of the girls in his life but not the other? The entire scene felt disjointed and uncomfortable, like a poorly scripted play.

Jake's father cleared his throat and was about to say something when Jamie heard footsteps behind her. She turned and saw Captain Hisel from the station. He was in his work pants and shirt, and his face looked

haggard, as though he hadn't slept in weeks. Jamie could only imagine the heartache he was dealing with at the station and throughout the city.

The station's losses made Jamie think about Sue, and how she still hadn't spoken to the woman. Not since Tuesday when they'd first learned Larry was missing.

The captain nodded at Jake's father and took slow steps into the room. "I had to check on him." His eyes met Jamie's, and he managed a weary smile. "Everyone at the station's pulling for him, praying for him to remember who he is."

*Everyone still alive*, Jamie wanted to add. But she didn't dare. Jake had no idea how he'd been hurt. He couldn't even remember the fact that he was a fireman, let alone the names of friends he'd had. Now that they were gone, the truth, the gravity and immensity of the situation, would have no bearing on Jake. It would only frighten him more.

Jake's father stepped back so Captain Hisel could find a place up against Jake's bed. "JB ... how're you feeling?"

"My head hurts." There wasn't a flicker of recognition in his eyes.

The captain looked down and patted Sierra on the head. "I see your best girls came to visit you."

Jake looked at their daughter. "I ... I remember Sierra."

"Well, that has to be a good sign." Captain Hisel hesitated, not knowing what to say.

As Jamie watched the captain's awkwardness, she sympathized. What did you say to a person who no longer remembered any of your shared experiences?

"I need ... to know something." Jake's voice was still hoarse and raspy, and it was an effort for him to talk. He strained to look from the captain to Jamie and over toward the wall at his father. "What happened to me?" He winced as though he was in awful pain. "Tell me about the accident."

Jamie took the initiative. Jake's doctors had said it would be better to

wait and let him find out what happened in a few weeks—when some of his memories might be returning. “You were fighting a fire.” Jamie sent a quick look to the others, silently begging them to refrain from adding details. “You hit your head when part of the building collapsed.”

“Was anyone else hurt?” Jake lifted his hand slowly toward his face and then changed his mind and let it fall again.

“That isn't important, Jake.” Jamie's tone put an end to the line of questions. “Let's focus on getting you better.”

Captain Hisel cleared his throat. “We miss you down at the station.”

Jake blinked. “What station?”

Captain Hisel looked at the others around the room and finally back at Jake. “The fire station.” The man's eyebrows formed a deep-set V. “Don't you remember?”

“Look ...” Jake gave a pained shake of his head and released a heavy sigh. “I don't know if this is ... some wacky dream or ... or if I've lost my mind.” Jake met Captain Hisel's eyes again. Discouragement tinged his voice. “But I don't remember the station ... or you.” He shifted his gaze to Jamie and his father. His words were slow and machinelike, dimmed by his raspy voice. “Or either of you ... or anything about being a fireman.” He looked at Sierra, and his eyes softened some. “The only thing I remember is Sierra.”

Jamie's head spun, and she had to grip the bed's guardrails to keep from falling. She flashed the captain a look and motioned toward the hallway. He nodded and turned as she leaned in closer to her husband. “We'll be out in the hall for a bit. Go ahead and rest, Jake.”

Taking Sierra by the hand, Jamie followed the captain and Jake's father into the hallway. The moment they were out of earshot from Jake, Captain Hisel stared at Jamie, his mouth open. This was the first time the captain had seen Jake since he'd regained consciousness. “He really doesn't remember.”

“No.” Jamie bit her lip to keep from crying. Her head was spinning

harder now, and the black spots were back, dancing before her eyes and making it hard to hear. “Not ... not even me.”

The men must've known she was about to fall, that she couldn't possibly stand up another minute under the weight of all that had happened. Jake's father came up along one side, Captain Hisel along the other, with Sierra in the middle. Together they formed a circle, arms linked, heads bowed, silenced by the tragedy of it all.

And for a long while no one spoke.

Jake's words had said it all.

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Questions had been weighing on Jake since he came to, and now he wanted answers. Here and there he'd caught snippets of conversations in the hallways—sometimes when he was in and out of sleep. Something major had happened in New York City, a disaster that involved more than him.

If he really was a firefighter, then Jake had the feeling he wasn't the only man injured in the incident—whatever it was.

He reached for the television remote and clicked the On button. Strange, that his brain could remember how to talk and operate a remote control. He could even picture New York City. But if his life depended on it, he couldn't remember his name or the woman who apparently was his wife.

A picture began to take shape on the TV screen, and a logo at the corner said CNN. The all-news channel—another thing he remembered. A man was standing behind a podium talking, and Jake glanced at the doorway, hoping the people he was supposed to know wouldn't come back. Not yet. If they weren't going to tell him what had happened, he had to find out for himself.

Jake focused, and someone offscreen asked the man a question—something about football games that weekend.

“The NFL will take this weekend off in honor of the victims of

September 11,” the man said. “We believe this is the least we can do to show our respect.”

NFL? That was the National Football League. So why were they taking a week off? And what had happened September 11 that would cause them to cancel all their games? They wanted to honor victims that had been hurt how? What was the man talking about? A realization hit him like a fist in the stomach. What day had he been injured, anyway? He wasn't sure, but he thought he'd been in the hospital just two days. Maybe he was one of the people hurt on September 11.

The image changed, and a somber-looking man announced that the station was going to do a recap of the events from the past two days. A picture flashed of two towering buildings. Fireballs and thick black smoke poured from the top of one of them, and before Jake could remember where he'd seen the buildings, an airplane came into view and flew smack into the other tower.

His mouth went dry. The reporter was saying something about terrorists and suicide missions, but none of it made sense. Terrorists? Flying planes into buildings? Had this happened while he was unconscious, or had he been in one of the buildings, even fighting the fire in one of them?

His hands shook, and the remote control fell to his lap.

Over the next few seconds, the recap showed the collapse of first one building, then the other. One image showed a different flaming structure—wider and nowhere near as tall. And finally, the picture changed to a rural-looking field, with what looked like a charred crater.

A chart appeared on the screen with a banner across the top that read, “Attacks on America.” The information detailed the apparent loss of four airplanes, multiple buildings in New York City, and Washington, D.C., and the deaths of some three thousand people, more than four hundred of which were firefighters or emergency personnel.

Three thousand people dead? And hundreds of firefighters?

Jake clicked off the TV, and suddenly a memory filled his mind, clear and detailed. The tall buildings were part of the World Trade Center—the famous Twin Towers in downtown Manhattan—situated in the heart of New York City.

The memory of the buildings was so clear it was striking, and Jake settled back against his pillow. There was only one reason why he would remember the buildings this well. He must've spent time there, and that meant the people outside were telling the truth. He was a firefighter, probably stationed somewhere near the towers. He and the other guys at his station had probably been in the buildings hundreds of times.

If that was true, then he must've been injured in the terrorist attacks. And not only that, but he was probably lucky to be alive. The numbers flashed through his head again. Thousands dead ... hundreds of emergency personnel. How had he survived? And which close friends and colleagues had been killed when those buildings tumbled to the ground?

He tried to remember the captain's name. Hiser or Hisen.... Whoever he was, no wonder he looked so shaken. The station hadn't responded to a fire. They'd responded to a national disaster, a tragedy worse than anything America had ever seen. And he'd been right there in the middle of it.

Reality took a moment to introduce itself.

So, his name was Jake, after all, and he really was a firefighter. He had to be; he'd been found beneath his fire truck, and the captain recognized him. Jake worked the sore muscles in his jaw and tried to imagine fighting fires, wearing the heavy uniform and holding the high-pressure hoses while flames raged around him. He could conjure up such scenes in his head, but not one of them felt familiar. And nothing came to mind when he tried to picture the station, the one the captain had asked him about.

Jake closed his eyes and concentrated so hard his face hurt beneath the bandages. He had obviously worked at the station dozens of hours every month for who knew how many years, so why couldn't he remember



any of it? If he could picture the World Trade Center buildings, why couldn't he picture the fire station?

And what about the woman? At first the idea of not remembering her had seemed so strange he merely dismissed the thought altogether. He couldn't be married to her, otherwise he'd know at least something about her. Instead, he'd assumed that somehow she must've been confused about him, and by believing that, he was able to convince himself the whole situation was some kind of enormous mistake.

But clearly he'd been wrong. Everything the people in the hall outside his room had been telling him was true. He was a firefighter, married to Jamie, and he worked at a station in New York City that had most likely been decimated by the terrorist attacks on September 11. Somehow he'd fought the biggest fire in the country's history and walked out of it alive. Sure, he'd lost his memory, but his doctors could do something about that. The important thing was, he'd survived.

Another understanding dawned in the dark corridors of his confused brain. If he was ever going to find his way back to the person he used to be, he'd need the support of the people outside in the hallway.

Especially Jamie and Sierra.

Recent memories came to mind, the terrified look on the woman's face each time she entered his room, the anxiety in the eyes of the other men, the man who was obviously his father, and the captain. No, Jake didn't recognize them. But he hadn't so much as smiled at them, either. However hard this ordeal was on him, they were going through something equally awful. Until a few days ago they'd shared intimate relationships and friendships with him, and now he was so disoriented he hadn't found it in himself even to be kind.

He was alive, after all. He had a family and friends who loved him. Jake pictured them again, Jamie and his father, the captain. Combined, he had not a single memory of any of them, and the reality of that would have left him utterly despondent if not for one thing—he remembered Sierra.

His little daughter gave him a starting place, a single rock to cling to as he set out on the climb of his life. The hike back to reality as it had been before September 11.

But if he was going to begin the journey, if he was going to do it with a smile, he needed to get started. And that meant he couldn't go another moment without having Sierra by his side and telling her something he should've said the moment he first saw her. Even if he didn't remember ever having said it before.

"Sierra ..." His voice was quiet and scratchy, lost in the hum of hospital machines around him. It fell far short of the door. He tightened the muscles in his stomach and tried again, the raspy words much louder this time. "Sierra ... come here."

The little girl popped her face just inside the room, and Jake felt a surge of emotion for the child, a wave of feeling that fell just short of recognition. Her hair fell in a cascade of curls, and her pink dress flounced below her knees as she moved into the room, still latched tightly to her mother's hand. "Daddy ...?"

"Yes ..." Jake swallowed hard. His throat hurt and his words sounded unnatural. Or maybe this was his normal voice, and he simply didn't recognize it. Jake tried not to think about the possibility. "Come here, Sierra."

A smile lifted the corners of her little mouth, and she lowered her chin, her eyes wide and tentative. The woman lowered her face to Sierra's. "Stay here for a minute, baby. I'm going to talk to Daddy first."

Sierra did as she was told and waited by the door. The men stayed in the hall, and that was fine with Jake. They were probably talking about how terrible it was that he couldn't remember them. Or maybe they figured he needed these moments alone with his family. Jamie made her way to his bed. The fear was still in her eyes, but this time Jake forced his bandaged face into what he hoped was a smile.

"Jake ..." She bit her lower lip to keep it from quivering. Her voice

was barely loud enough for him to hear. “I know you don't remember me. I'm not sure how much you remember Sierra.” She paused and gripped the guardrails on his bed once more. “But please ... if you don't remember, at least pretend. For Sierra's sake.” She opened her mouth, and a quiet laugh tangled up with a cry. She put the back of her hand against her mouth for a moment. “Last week you were curling her hair and taking her to church. At least act like you know her. Okay?”

Jake held her eyes for a long while. “Okay.” His voice was so hoarse he could barely speak. “I'm sorry, Jamie. I'd give anything to ... to remember you.”

Her eyes glistened. She sniffed and straightened, as though she was desperate to keep her composure, and she nodded her thanks and then returned to Sierra.

“All right, honey. Daddy wants to talk to you.”

Sierra looked past Jamie to Jake, and this time he managed to wave his fingers at her. She followed Jamie back to his bed and found the courage to step up, her face inches from his. “Hi, Daddy.”

A lump grew in Jake's throat, and he considered his feelings. Each time he looked at the girl or thought about her, he was swallowed up in emotions. “Hi, Sierra.” He cast a quick look at Jamie, then back to his daughter. “Thanks for coming.”

Sierra cocked her head, her eyes wide. “Did you lose your voice, Daddy?”

“Yes, honey.” This time his smile wasn't forced. “I think I hurt it in the fire.”

“Oh.” She nodded.

The moment felt awkward again, and Jake's mind raced. He would have to find familiar ground—even if none existed. He reached his bandaged arms through the holes in his bedrails and took hold of Sierra's fingers. The lump was back, and speaking was still more difficult. “Daddy's gonna need your help to get better, okay, honey?”

“Okay.” She beamed at the notion. “I’ll bring you water and toast and ice cream in bed when you come home.”

“Perfect.” Out of the corner of his eye, Jake saw Jamie wipe at a tear. He kept his focus on Sierra.

“I’m glad you’re okay, Daddy.” She lowered her face to his hand and planted a gentle kiss on each of his fingers. “You can’t do butterfly kisses yet, but I can. Okay?”

“Okay.” Jake used what was left of his energy to extend his fingers a bit farther and stroke the child’s feathery soft cheek. Then he said the only thing he could say, the single truth he hoped would somehow bridge his past and his present. Though he couldn’t remember saying it before, though he wasn’t sure it reflected his feelings perfectly, it was the only thing he had to hang onto.

“I love you, Sierra. I’ll always love you.”

## Negentien

13 September 2001

Jamie het haar laaste bietjie krag nodig om Sierra daardie aand hospitaal toe te bring. Op die ou end het sy Jake se pa gesmeek om saam te kom. Hy was van plan om sy kuier vir die volgende dag te hou sodat Jamie en Sierra die geleentheid kon hê om alleen by Jake te kuier.

Maar Jamie was angsbevange by die vooruitsig om hom weer te sien.

“Hy het my nie geken nie, Pa. Glad nie.” Jamie se hande het gebewe en sy kon skaars dink. Haar maag was seer van spanning. “Kom saam met my, asseblief. Ek kan nie alleen gaan nie. Buitendien, dalk herken hy Pa.”

Jim Bryan het ingestem en nou is hy besig om gereed te maak. Sierra het haar nuwe pienk kerkrok aangetrek, die een waarvan Jake net Sondag nog so ’n ophief gemaak het. Die dogtertjie is in die woonkamer stroopsoet besig om pop te speel. Jamie kyk vanuit die kombuis na haar en wil na haar toe gaan, langs haar gaan sit en vir haar sê dat haar pappa weer gaan regkom. Maar sy kan nie lank genoeg ophou bewe om in volsinne te praat nie. Jake het vanselfsprekend ’n breinbesering opgedoen en daar is groot fout. Dit voel asof hulle twee mekaar nog van altyd af geken het. Die brandweermanne werk in twaalfuur-skofte. Jake het amper van die begin af dagskof gewerk, en hulle was nooit meer as ’n aand van mekaar af weg nie.

Hoe kan hy haar nie ken nie?

Haar mond is droog en haar gedagtes in 'n warboel. Sy skink vir haar 'n glas water en drink dit in drie slukke op. Sê nou sy geheue kom nooit terug nie? Hoe is sy veronderstel om hom te leer om haar weer lief te hê soos aan die begin? Sy byt aan die binnekant van haar mond en staan met haar hande op die kombuistoonbank terwyl sy na hulle klein agterplaas kyk. Jake se liefde was iets waarop sy haar geheel en al verlaat het. Daar was altyd die moontlikheid dat hy kon doodgaan, ja, maar vir so lank Jake Bryan asemhaal, sou hy haar liefhê. Te midde van ure se spanning en kommer het sy nooit gedink dat hy kon seerkry of dat 'n hoofbesering hom van 'n leeftyd se herinneringe wat hulle saam opgebou het, kon beroof nie.

Sierra spring van die bank af op en huppel na haar toe, die pienk rokkie wolkerig om haar beentjies. “Kom ons ry.” Sy hou haar kop skeef en glimlag. “Ek wil by Pappa kuier.”

“Ons wag net vir Oupa.” Jamie laat haar asem uit en voel effens kalmer. Ten minste gaan Jake se pa ook daar wees. Sy streel oor Sierra se voorkop en dan dink sy aan iets. Sy moet haar dogtertjie voorberei op wat sy by die hospitaal gaan sien. “My liefie ... Pappa is in die hospitaal, want hy het seergekry. Jy weet dit, nè?”

“Oupa sê hy’s in die hospitaal, en sy kop het ’n eina.”

“Dis reg.” Jamie knik en bestudeer Sierra se oë. Die kind het nie ’n idee nie.

“Maar die dokters het baie verbande om Pappa se kop en gesig gedraai. Hy lyk nie ...” Haar stem wil breek en sy baklei teen die trane. “Hy lyk anders as gewoonlik.”

“Bedoel Mamma omdat sy gesig ook seer is?”

“Ja, my skat.” Jamie trek Sierra nader en gee haar ’n drukkie. “Maar die dokters gaan hom beter maak.” Sy laat haar gaan en sorg dat sy in haar oë kyk. “Oukei?”

“Oukei.” Sierra se oë word groot en sy sluk. “Kan hy saam met ons huis toe kom?”

“Eers oor ’n paar slapies.”

Sy hoor voetstappe in die aangrensende vertrek en Jim Bryan verskyn in die kombuisdeur, sy oë ernstig en vasberade, amper asof hy hom staal. Jake kry dieselfde uitdrukking wanneer hy haar van ’n noodgeval of gevaarlike brand vertel. Hy steek sy hand uit en gee Jamie se arm ’n sagte drukkie. “Kom ons ry.”

Sy is onuitspreeklik dankbaar vir sy teenwoordigheid. Dit gee haar die geleentheid om oor die situasie te dink, te probeer uitwerk hoe hulle dit gaan oorleef. Hulle ry saam by die huis en veertig minute later is hulle by Jake se hospitaalkamer. Hy lê plat op sy rug, sy hele kop steeds in verbande. Jamie kan nie sien of hy wakker is nie.

“Pappa?” Sierra gaan staan botstil, haar oë groot.

“Jake ...” Jamie neem Sierra se hand en loop na haar man se bed toe. “Sierra is hier.”

Sy oë gaan oop toe hy haar naam hoor. Met klein, moeisame bewegings draai

hy sy kop en kyk na haar. Al wat van sy mond sigbaar is, is 'n klein opening in die gaas; dus is dit onmoontlik om te sien of hy glimlag. Jamie kan glad nie agterkom of die aanskoue van sy dogtertjie die een of ander herinnering terugbring nie. Hy hou sy oë op die dogtertjie, en uiteindelik slaag hy daarin om die woord te vorm. “Sierra ...”

Sierra se handjie verstyf in Jamie s'n en sy kruip halfagter haar weg. Sy lig haar gesiggie op en Jamie word getref deur wat sy daar sien. Die kind is bang. Sy ken Jake net as die gespierde, aktiewe, gesonde man wat hy voor Dinsdagoggend was.

Hierdie man – op 'n hospitaalbed en toegedraai in verbande – is nie net iemand wat sy nie herken nie. Maar iemand wat haar bang maak.

“Mamma ...” Sierra praat in 'n fluisterstem. “Wat is fout met hom?”

Jim Bryan staan 'n paar treë terug sodat hierdie oomblik aan hulle drie kan behoort. Jamie soek na die regte woorde. “Pappa het by die werk seergekry, liefding.”

Haar dogtertjie se oë word ronde sirkels. “In 'n vuur?”

“Ja, my skat.” Jamie kyk na Jim vir hulp, maar hy staar na Jake. Waarskynlik net so geskok soos Sierra om hom so in die hospitaalbed te sien. “Hy is in 'n brand beseer.”

“Dan ...” Sierra se oë beweeg na Jake en sy sluk swaar. “Dan sal ek vir hom bid. Solat hy beter kan word.”

“Ja, ons kan nou-nou so maak, oukei?” Jamie draai na die bed en kyk af na haar man. “Hoe voel jy?”

Sy oë ontmoet hare, maar dis onmoontlik om sy uitdrukking te peil. “My gesig is seer.”

“Ek's jammer.” Die volgende paar sekondes voel soos ure terwyl Jamie na iets soek om te sê. Uiteindelik draai sy halfom en beduie dat Jake se pa langs haar moet kom staan. Hy lyk onseker, maar kom tog nader en gaan staan aan Sierra se ander kant.

Jamie kyk terug na Jake. “Ek het jou pa saamgebring.”

Jake knip sy oë en draai sy kop net genoeg om Jim Bryan te sien. “Jy's ... my pa?”

“Hallo, my seun.” Jim neem Jake se hand, sy oë is blink van die tranes. “Alles gaan regkom.”

“Ek's jou seun?” Jake staar na Jim.

Jake lyk net so bang soos Sierra, en Jamie wil haarself knyp, haarself uit hierdie nagmerrie ruk waarin hulle almal gewerp is. Dis nie besig om te gebeur nie ... dit kan nie wees nie. Jake sal nooit nié vir haar of sy pa herken nie. Dis onmoontlik.

“Ja, Jake.” Jim Bryan knik toe 'n traan oor sy verweerde gesig loop. “Ek's jou pa.”

“O.” Jake staar nog 'n paar sekondes na hom voordat sy oë weer na Sierra soek.

Toe sy besef dat Jake na haar kyk, besluit sy skynbaar om dapper te wees. Sy

loer agter Jamie uit en raak met haar klein vingertjies aan Jake se hand. “Haai, Pappa.”

“Haai.” Jake se oë is uitdrukkingloos.

“Gaan Jesus Pappa beter maak?”

Hy gee ’n vinnige kyk na Jamie en sy pa. “Ek hoop so.”

Jamie se knieë voel swak. Hoe moet dit vir Jake voel om hier te lê, om niemand behalwe Sierra te herken nie? En waarom Sierra? Waarom nie sy, die vrou wat hy nog altyd liefgehad het nie? Hoe kan hy een van die vroue in sy lewe onthou, maar nie die ander nie? Die hele toneel voel onnatuurlik en geforseerd, soos iets uit ’n tweederangse fliek.

Jake se pa maak keel skoon en is op die punt om iets te sê toe Jamie voetstappe agter haar hoor. Sy draai om en sien kaptein Hisel van die stasie. Hy is in sy werksbroek en -hemp, en sy gesig lyk ingevalle, asof hy weke laas geslaap het. Jamie kan haar die hartseer net voorstel waarmee hy by die stasie en oor die hele stad te kampe het.

Die stasie se verliese laat Jamie aan Sue dink, en dat sy nog nie met die vrou gepraat het nie. Nie sedert Dinsdag toe hulle gehoor het dat Larry vermis word nie.

Die kaptein knik vir Jake se pa en loop met stadige treë nader. “Ek moes by hom kom inloer.” Sy oë ontmoet Jamie s’n en hy glimlag moeg. “Almal by die stasie dink aan hom en bid dat hy sal onthou wie hy is.”

*Almal wat nog lewe*, wil Jamie byvoeg. My sy durf nie. Jake weet nie hoe hy hier gekom het nie. Hy kan nie eens onthou dat hy ’n brandweerman is nie, laat staan nog die name van die ouens wat sy vriende was. Noudat hulle nie meer daar is nie, sal die waarheid, die erns en omvang van die situasie, nie vir Jake van betekenis wees nie. Dit sal hom net nog angstiger laat voel.

Jake se pa maak plek sodat kaptein Hisel langs die bed kan staan. “JB ... hoe gaan dit hier?”

“My kop is seer.” Daar is nie ’n sweempie herkenning in sy oë nie.

Die kaptein kyk af en vryf oor Sierra se hare. “Ek sien jou twee meisies het vir jou kom kuier.”

Jake kyk na hulle dogter. “Ek ... ek onthou vir Sierra.”

“Nou toe, dis ’n goeie teken.” Kaptein Hisel aarsel, onseker oor wat om te sê.

Jamie het simpatie met die kaptein se onbeholpenheid. Wat sê ’n mens vir iemand wat nie meer onthou dat hy jou geken het nie?

“Daar is iets ... wat ek moet weet.” Jake se stem is steeds hees en skor, en dis duidelik dat hy nog moeilik praat. Hy moet hom inspan om van die kaptein na Jamie na sy pa by die muur te kyk. “Wat het met my gebeur?” Hy maak ’n geluid asof hy vreeslik pyn het. “Vertel my van die ongeluk.”

Jamie neem die inisiatief. Jake se dokters het gesê dit sal beter wees om te wag en hom oor ’n paar weke te vertel wat gebeur het – wanneer sommige van sy herinneringe dalk begin terugkom. “Julle was na ’n brand toe uitgeroep.” Jamie kyk vinnig na die ander, asof om te smeeek dat hulle nie verdere besonderhede verskaf nie. “Jy het jou kop gestamp toe ’n gedeelte van

die gebou ineengestort het.”

“Het enigiemand anders seergekry?” Jake tel sy hand op om aan sy gesig te vat, maar verander van plan en laat dit weer op die bed terugval.

“Dis nie belangrik nie, Jake.” Jamie se stem is beslis. “Kom ons fokus nou eers daarop om jou beter te kry.”

Kaptein Hisel maak keel skoon. “Ons mis jou by die stasie.”

Jake knip sy oë. “Watter stasie?”

Kaptein Hisel kyk na die ander in die kamer en dan weer na Jake. “Die brandweerstasie.” Die man se wenkbroue vorm ’n diep V. “Onthou jy nie?”

“Kyk ...” Jake skud sy kop moeisaam en sug swaar. “Ek weet nie of dit ... ’n nare droom is en of ... of ek van my trollie af is nie.” Jake kyk weer in kaptein Hisel se oë en vervolg in ’n moedelse stem. “Maar ek onthou niks van die stasie ... of van jou nie.” Hy kyk na Jamie en sy pa. Sy woorde is stadig en meganies, sy hees stem gedemp. “Of van julle nie ... of dat ek ’n brandweerman was nie.” Hy kyk na Sierra en sy oë versag effens. “Al wat ek onthou, is Sierra.”

Jamie se kop begin draai en sy moet aan die bed se reling vashou om nie te val nie. Sy kyk na die kaptein en wys met haar kop na die gang. Hy knik en draai om toe sy oor haar man leun. “Ons gaan vir ’n rukkie hier buite wees. Rus jy so ’n bietjie, Jake.”

Sy neem Sierra aan die hand en volg die kaptein en Jake se pa na die gang. Die oomblik toe hulle buite hoorafstand is, kyk kaptein Hisel na Jamie, sy mond oop. Dis die eerste keer dat hy Jake gesien het sedert hy uit die koma is. “Hy kan regtig nie onthou nie.”

“Nee.” Jamie byt haar lip vas om haar tranes te keer. Sy voel lighoofdig en daar is swart spikkels voor haar oë wat dit moeilik maak om te hoor. “Nie ... nie eens vir my nie.”

Die mans moes geweet het sy gaan val; dat sy nie ’n oomblik langer kan regop bly onder alles wat die afgelope paar dae gebeur het nie. Jake se pa en kaptein Hisel kom haak aan weerskante van haar in, en met Sierra in die middel vorm hulle ’n verwese groepie, stom voor die tragiese gebeure.

Vir ’n lang ruk praat niemand nie.

Jake het immers alles gesê.

Jake is moeg gewag vir antwoorde op die vrae wat by hom spook sedert hy wakker geword het. Hier en daar het brokkies van gesprekke in die gange hom bereik – soms wanneer hy tussen wakker en slaap was. Daar het iets groots in New York gebeur, ’n ramp waardeur meer mense as hyself geraak is.

As hy regtig ’n brandweerman is, het Jake die gevoel dat hy nie die enigste man was wat in die insident beseer is nie. Wat die insident ook al was.

Hy reik na die afstandbeheerder en skakel die televisie aan. Vreemd dat sy brein kan onthou hoe om te praat en ’n afstandbeheerder te gebruik. As hy sy oë toemaak, kan hy New York voor hom sien. Maar hy kan om die dood nie sy naam of die Jamie wat blykbaar sy vrou is, onthou nie.

In die hoek van die televisieskerm verskyn die CNN-logo. Die nuuskanaal –



nog iets wat hy onthou. 'n Man staan op 'n podium en praat, en Jake kyk vinnig na die deur. Die mense wat hy veronderstel is om te ken, moenie nou hier inkom nie. As hulle nie vir hom gaan sê wat gebeur het nie, gaan hy self uitvind.

Iemand buite die beeld vra die man 'n vraag – iets van die naweek se voetbalwedstryde.

“Die NFL het hierdie naweek se wedstryde ter nagedagtenis van die slagoffers van 11 September gekanselleer,” sê die man. “Dit is die minste wat ons kan doen om eerbied te betoon.”

NFL? Dis die Nasionale Voetballiga. Waarom speel hulle nie die naweek nie? En wat het op 11 September gebeur wat sal maak dat hulle al hulle wedstryde kanselleer? Aan wie wil hulle eer betoon? Waarvan praat die man? Toe tref dit hom. Wanneer is hy beseer? Hy is nie seker nie, maar hy verbeel hom hy is nog net twee dae in die hospitaal. Dalk is hy een van die mense wat op 11 September seergekry het.

Die beeld verander en 'n ernstige man sê dat die stasie 'n kortlikse herhaling van die afgelope twee dae se gebeure gaan gee. Die volgende oomblik is daar twee toringgeboue op die skerm. Vlamme en dik swart rookwolke borrel bo uit die een, en voordat Jake kan onthou waar hy die geboue gesien het, verskyn daar 'n vliegtuig op die skerm wat reguit in die ander toring vasvlieg. Sy mond raak droog. Die verslaggewer sê iets van terroriste en selfmoordsendings, maar niks wil sin maak nie. Terroriste wat met vliegtuie in geboue vasvlieg? Het dit gebeur terwyl hy bewusteloos was of was hy in een van die geboue, besig om mense te probeer red?

Sy hande bewe en die afstandbeheerder val op sy skoot.

Gedurende die volgende sekondes word die ineenstorting van eers die een, dan die ander toring uitgesaai. Toe is daar 'n beeld van 'n ander brandende gebou – breër en nie naastenby so hoog nie. En uiteindelik verander die beeld na 'n oop stuk veld met iets wat soos 'n verkoolde krater lyk.

'n Grafiek verskyn op die skerm, die opskrif: “Aanvalle op Amerika.” Dit detailleer die verlies van vier vliegtuie, verskeie geboue in New York en Washington, D.C., en die dood van ongeveer drieduisend mense, onder andere meer as vierhonderd brandweermanne en reddingswerkers.

Drieduisend mense? En honderde brandweermanne?

Jake skakel die televisie af en skielik kom dit na hom toe terug. Die hoë geboue is deel van die World Trade Center – die bekende tweelingtorings in Manhattan – in die hartjie van New York.

Die herinnering aan die geboue is treffend helder en Jake sak terug op sy kussing. Daar is net een rede waarom hy die geboue so goed sal ken. Hy moes heelwat tyd daar deurgebring het, en dit beteken dat die mense daarbuite die waarheid praat. Hy is 'n brandweerman, waarskynlik iewers naby die torings gestasioneer. Hy en die ander ouens by sy stasie was waarskynlik al honderde kere in die geboue.

As dit waar is, moes hy tydens die terroriste-aanvalle seergekry het. En nie net

dit nie, hy kan vermoedelik sy sterre dank dat hy nog lewe. Die getalle flits weer deur sy gedagtes. Duisende sterftes ... honderde reddingswerkers. Hoe het hy oorleef? En hoeveel van sy goeie vriende en kollegas is dood toe die geboue neergestort het?

Hy probeer die kaptein se naam onthou. Hiser of Hisen ... Nou verstaan hy waarom die man so ontdaan lyk. Die stasie het nie op 'n brand gereageer nie. Hulle het op 'n nasionale ramp, die grootste tragedie in die land se geskiedenis, gereageer. En hy was daar.

Dit neem 'n oomblik voordat die werklikheid tot hom deurdring.

Sy naam is met ander woorde regtig Jake, en hy is regtig 'n brandweerman. Hy moet wees; hulle het hom onder sy brandweerwa gekry, en die kaptein het hom herken. Jake beweeg sy seer kakebeen terwyl hy hom probeer voorstel hoe dit moet wees om vure dood te maak, die swaar uniform te dra en die hoëdrukbrandslange te hanteer terwyl hy hom in 'n vlammesee bevind. Hy kan hom dit so half en half indink, maar dit voel nie bekend nie. En daar kom niks by hom op as hy aan die stasie dink waaroor die kaptein uitgevra het nie. Jake maak sy oë toe en konsentreer so hard dat sy gesig begin pyn. Hy het hoeveel jaar lank elke maand honderde ure by die stasie gewerk; hoekom kan hy niks daarvan onthou nie? Hy kan die World Trade Center voor hom sien, hoekom nie die stasie nie?

En wat van die vrou? Aanvanklik was die idee dat hy haar nie kan onthou nie so vreemd dat hy die gedagte geheel en al verwerp het. As hulle getroud was, sou hy immers iets van haar onthou het. Hy het aanvaar dat sy hom met iemand anders verwar het, en deur homself daarvan te oortuig, kon hy hom wysmaak dat die hele situasie 'n reuse fout was.

Maar dis duidelik dat hy verkeerd was. Alles wat die mense in die gang voor sy kamer gesê het, is waar. Hy is 'n brandweerman; hy is met Jamie getroud en hy werk by 'n stasie in New York wat in die terroriste-aanval op 11 September waarskynlik amper afgemaai is. Op die een of ander manier het hy die grootste brand in die land se geskiedenis trotseer en lewendig daar uitgekom. Hy het wel sy geheue verloor, maar die dokters kan iets daaraan doen. Die belangrikste is dat hy oorleef het.

Toe daag daar nog 'n begrip in sy verwarde brein. As hy weer die mens gaan word wat hy was, sal hy die ondersteuning van die mense buite in die gang nodig hê.

Veral van Jamie en Sierra.

Onlangse herinneringe kom by hom op, die verskrikte uitdrukking op die vrou se gesig elke keer wanneer sy by die kamer inkom, die angs in die ander mans se oë, die man wat klaarblyklik sy pa is, en die kaptein. Nee, Jake kan hulle nie onthou nie. Maar hy het tot dusver nog nie eens die moeite gedoen om vir hulle te glimlag nie. Hoe swaar hy ook al deur hierdie ramp getref is, hy besef hulle worstel deur net so 'n aaklige beproewing. Tot 'n paar dae gelede het hy in intieme en hegte verhoudings met hulle gestaan, en nou is hy so gedisorienteerde dat hy homself nie eens sover kan bring om vriendelik te wees

nie.

Hy lewe immers. Hy het 'n familie en vriende wat vir hom lief is. Jake sien hulle weer voor hom, Jamie en sy pa, die kaptein. Nie een van hulle lui 'n klokke nie, en daardie realiteit sou hom gebreek het as dit nie vir een ligpunt was nie – hy onthou vir Sierra. Sy klein dogtertjie gee hom 'n beginpunt, 'n rots waaraan hy kan vashou terwyl hy met die klim van sy lewe begin. Die staptog terug na sy lewe voor 11 September.

Maar as hy hierdie tog wil aanpak, as hy dit met 'n glimlag gaan doen, sal hy vanaand nog moet wegspring. En dit beteken dat hy nou met Sierra moet praat en haar iets vertel wat hy die oomblik moes gesê het toe hy haar die eerste keer gesien het. Selfs al onthou hy nie dat hy dit al ooit voorheen gesê het nie. “Sierra ... ” Sy stem is swak en krapperig en word deur die gezoem van die masjiene rondom hom ingesluk. Dit dra nie tot by die deur nie. Hy span sy maagspiere en probeer weer, die skor woorde hierdie keer hoorbaarder. “Sierra ... kom hier.”

Die klein dogtertjie steek haar kop by die deur in, en Jake ervaar 'n opwelling van emosie vir die kind, 'n gevoel wat aan herkenning grens. Haar hare val krullerig oor haar skouers en haar rokkie maak 'n wolk net onder haar knieë toe sy naderkom, haar handjie steeds styf in haar ma s'n. “Pappa ... ?”

“Ja ... ” Jake sluk swaar. Sy keel is seer en sy woorde klink onnatuurlik. Of dalk is dit sy normale stem wat hy bloot nie herken nie. Jake probeer om nie aan daardie moontlikheid te dink nie. “Kom hiernatoe, Sierra.”

'n Glimlag verskyn om haar mondjie en sy laat sak haar ken, haar oë groot en onseker. Die vrou buig sodat sy Sierra in die oë kan kyk. “Wag net 'n oomblik hier, liefie. Ek gaan net eers met Pappa praat.”

Sierra gehoorsaam en wag by die deur. Die mans bly in die gang, en dit pas Jake. Hulle praat seker oor hoe vreeslik dit is dat hy hulle nie onthou nie. Of dalk voel hulle net dat hy hierdie paar oomblikke alleen met sy gesin moet hê. Jamie loop tot by sy bed. Die vrees is steeds in haar oë, maar hierdie keer doen Jake sy bes om verby sy verbande te glimlag.

“Jake ... ” Sy byt haar onderlip vas om te keer dat dit bewe. Toe praat sy in 'n skaars hoorbare stem. “Ek weet jy kan my nie onthou nie. Ek's nie seker hoeveel jy van Sierra onthou nie.” Sy bly stil en plaas haar hande weer op die reling. “Maar, asseblief ... as jy nie onthou nie, maak asof jy haar ken. Ter wille van Sierra.” Sy maak haar mond weer oop en 'n hartseer laggie ontsnap oor haar lippe. Sy plaas die rugkant van haar hand vir 'n oomblik oor haar mond. “Verlede week het jy haar hare ingedraai en haar kerk toe gevat. Maak asseblief net of jy haar ken, sal jy?”

Jake kyk 'n rukkje lank in haar oë. “Oukei.” Sy stem is so hees dat hy skaars kan praat. “Ek's jammer, Jamie. Ek sou enigiets gee om ... om jou te onthou.” Haar oë glinster vol tranes. Sy snuif en maak haar skouers reguit, asof desperaat om haar selfbeheersing te herwin, en knik dankbaar voordat sy na Sierra toe draai.

“Nou toe, my skat. Pappa wil met jou praat.”

Sierra kyk verby Jamie na Jake, en hierdie keer slaag hy daarin om met sy vingers vir haar te waai. Sy volg Jamie na hom toe en skraap genoeg moed bymekaar om teen die bed te kom staan, haar gesiggie sentimeters van syne af. “Hallo, Pappa.”

Daar is ’n knop in Jake se keel en hy probeer sy gevoelens analiseer. Elke keer wanneer hy na die dogtertjie kyk of aan haar dink, word hy deur sy emosies oorweldig. “Hallo, Sierra.” Hy kyk vinnig na Jamie, toe weer terug na sy dogtertjie. “Dankie dat jy gekom het.”

Sierra se oë is groot. “Pappa, het jy jou stem verloor?”

“Ja, my skat.” Hierdie keer is die glimlag nie geforseerd nie. “Ek dink ek het dit in die vuur seergemaak.”

“O.” Sy knik.

’n Ongemaklike stilte volg, en Jake soek desperaat na iets om te sê. Hy sal iewers ’n raakpunt moet kry – selfs al bestaan daar nie een nie. Hy steek sy toegedraaide arms deur die reling en hou Sierra se vingers vas. Die knop is terug in sy keel, en dis nog moeiliker om te praat. “Jy sal Pappa moet help om gesond te word, my skat. Sal jy?”

“Ek sal.” Sy straal by die gedagte. “Ek sal vir Pappa water en roosterbrood en roomys in die bed bring as Pappa huis toe kom.”

“Wonderlik.” Uit die hoek van sy oog sien hy hoe Jamie ’n traan wegvee, maar hy bepaal sy aandag by Sierra.

“Ek’s bly dat Pappa beter is.” Sy laat sak haar gesig en druk ’n sagte soentjie op sy vingers. “Pappa kan nog nie vlindersoentjies gee nie, maar ek kan. Oukei?”

“Oukei.” Jake gebruik sy laaste bietjie krag om sy vingers nog verder uit te steek en oor die kind se satynsagte wangetjie te streel. Toe sê hy al wat hy kan sê, die enigste waarheid wat hy hoop sy hede en verlede sal oorbrug. Al kan hy nie onthou dat hy dit al ooit tevore gesê het nie, al is hy nie seker of dit sy gevoelens akkuraat weerspieël nie, is dit al waaraan hy kan vashou.

“Ek is lief vir jou, Sierra. Pappa sal altyd vir jou lief wees.”

# Chapter TWENTY

SEPTEMBER 17, 2001

The doctor's information was more than Jamie could process at once.

But somehow, after a weekend of emotions too jumbled to sort through, Jamie was sure of one thing. This meeting with Dr. Cleary was the only way any of them could move forward.

By now they all knew that Jake was aware of how he'd been injured. So in addition to the pain of his injuries and the frustration of not remembering his past, he had to deal with the awful enormity of what had happened to him and his friends on September 11.

Jamie sat by Jake's bed, her hands folded on her lap. She didn't have the nerve to hold his hand, not since he woke up. A few times over the weekend, Jake had made an effort to cast her a kind look or even the hint of a smile. But it was obvious by the things he said—and the things he didn't say—that he still saw her as a stranger. Dr. Cleary had already explained what type of head injury Jake must have suffered in order to lose his memory. Now the doctor was getting specific.

“Let's talk about amnesia.” He looked from Jake to Jamie. “You've had a few days to see where Jake's at, what he remembers.” The man hesitated. “I'm sure you have questions.”

Jake was partially sitting up in bed, and he gave a nod of his bandaged head. “Lots.” Doctors had removed most of the bandages on his arms and replaced them with smaller, patchlike sections of gauze. His voice was still raspy. “It's so random, what I remember and what I don't.”

“Exactly.” Dr. Cleary leaned forward, and his expression grew serious. “The brain compartmentalizes information, and memory is no exception. A part of your brain contains the memory of learned behavior—sitting, standing, walking, eating, even vocabulary. Another part contains functional memory—language, the meaning of various terms and

expressions, memories of places and routines.”

“Jake remembers those things.” Jamie glanced over her shoulder at him. “At least I think you do. Right?”

“Yes.” Jake nodded. “And I can remember everything that's happened since I woke up.”

“Exactly. A third of the brain's memory bank is devoted to that type of remembering. Short-term memory, it's called.” He pursed his lips and studied Jake. “The problem we're dealing with is long-term memory—an area of loss that's most common with head injuries like yours.”

“I don't get it.” Jamie closed her eyes and pinched the bridge of her nose. Her stomach was in knots as she dropped her hands into her lap and looked at the doctor again. “If his long-term memory is gone, how come he can remember how to eat or the fact that he worked in New York City?”

Dr. Cleary shifted his position and nodded as though he'd expected her questions. “Again, the brain sees those memories as more learned behavior or functional information. Occasionally, a person with a head injury will lose that part of his memory as well. But long-term memory loss is something different.” He paused and took a slow breath. “Picture a storage unit filled with information about specific people and experiences shared with those people. That's a picture of a person's long-term memory.”

“That's what I'm missing?” Jake adjusted himself so he was partially on his side, facing the doctor.

Jamie caught the way he still winced when he moved.

“Definitely not. Every memory you've ever made is still in that storage unit.” The doctor managed a sad smile. “But right now the door's locked, and none of us can find the key.”

Jamie folded her arms tight and pushed her fists into her stomach. The information was interesting, but it didn't tell her what she wanted to know, what she was desperate to know. When would Jake recognize her? She did a little cough and tried to find a way to voice her feelings. “Are you saying ... that someday he'll get his memory back?”

“Almost always.” This time the doctor's smile was fuller. “Long-term memory loss generally lasts no more than six months. The exact timing is different for every patient, but most of the people suffering from this type of amnesia get flashbacks as early as two or three months into their recovery.”

“Flashbacks?” Jake ran his fingers over his right forearm. Though the bandages had been removed, the burns on that arm were the worst of all.

Jamie's heart went out to him. She moved to put her hand on his shoulder, to comfort him and let him know she was sorry he was hurting. But she stopped herself. Any small shows of affection would only make Jake nervous.

Dr. Cleary stood and walked closer to Jake's bed, looking from him to Jamie. “Flashbacks are definitely part of the healing process. They're the brain's way of letting an amnesiac see through the window of the hidden storage unit I was talking about earlier.” He leveled his gaze at Jake. “They're a little scary sometimes.”

*Scary?* Jamie felt her heart skip a beat. How could anything be more frightening than looking into her husband's eyes and seeing not a bit of recognition? “In what way?”

“The first memories that return are usually those closest to the point of memory loss.” Dr. Cleary gripped the railing along the side of Jake's bed. “That means memories of the accident.”

Whatever he'd been through in those final moments, it had to have been horrific. Dr. Cleary looked at Jamie. “At first the flashbacks tend to come just before or after sleeping. He might sit up suddenly in bed or yell out in the middle of the night.” He hesitated. “You'll have to help him through that.”

She nodded. “Okay.”

Dr. Cleary moved to the end of the bed and lifted Jake's chart. “That about covers the amnesia.” He shot a brief look at Jamie. “I'll talk about that a little more with you later. For now, let's go over his burns.”

Jamie had been so caught up with her husband's memory loss, she'd barely considered the fact that he had burns to deal with. Yes, they were painful, but beyond that Jamie hadn't given it much thought. She narrowed her eyes, grateful for the diversion.

"How's the skin on your face feeling, Jake?" The doctor kept his eyes on the chart as he returned to the side of the bed.

Jake lifted his left hand and gave a light touch to his bandaged cheeks and forehead. "It stings."

"By the looks of it, you were headed back into the building when it collapsed." The doctor bent over and carefully lifted the corner of one of the bandages on Jake's right arm. "A burst of searing hot air must've knocked you back, pushed you under the fire truck. In the process it burned your arms and face." He lifted the corner of another bandage and looked at the burn beneath. "Your arms are healing nicely. Second-degree burns, which means you'll have some scarring, a deep redness for the first six months or so, but much of it will disappear in the first year."

This time the doctor peered beneath the top section of the bandages still covering Jake's face. "You were very lucky with your face. The skin on your cheeks and forehead took the brunt of the heat and came close to being third-degree burns." He straightened and glanced at the clipboard again. "The wrap we're using is helping a lot. I think we'll be able to avoid skin grafts."

"What about scars?" Jamie didn't want to ask, but she had to. Jake's face had been the first thing that made her fall in love with him when they were kids. Not that it mattered; she would love Jake no matter how he looked. But still, she had to know.

"He'll have some." The doctor lowered the clipboard and held it against his side. "But nothing drastic. In a year or so you'll have to look close to even see them. Of course, his throat and lungs have been damaged too. Burned by the same hot blast."

"That's why I sound like this?" Jake held a hand to his throat. "And



why I can't breathe right?"

"Yes. But you'll heal up." Dr. Cleary nodded. "We've been giving you moist air breathing treatments, and that'll continue for the next week or so, and after that you'll be much better. We won't be sure until then if you have permanent damage to your voice, but that won't affect your release date." He took a step back and looked at Jamie. "The head incisions are healing nicely. His brain size is back to normal." He slipped his hands in the pockets of his white jacket. "If nothing else changes, you can go home next Monday or Tuesday."

Panic slammed into Jamie's heart, and she crossed her arms more tightly around her waist. How was she supposed to bring Jake home when he didn't remember her? "That ... that soon?" She caught Jake's eyes and saw he shared her concern.

"Yes." Dr. Cleary gave Jake a pointed look. "The sooner you get situated in a familiar environment—even one you can't remember now—the sooner your memory will return." He smiled and set the chart on a nearby table. "Why don't you get some sleep, Jake. I'll talk to your wife out in the hall."

Jamie followed the doctor out of the room, but she felt dizzy and detached. As though she still couldn't believe this was her life. Jake? Jake her lifelong love didn't remember her? It was like some kind of crazy joke.

They walked a few feet away from Jake's room, and Dr. Cleary turned and faced her. "I have to be honest with you, Mrs. Bryan. A lot about Jake's recovery will be up to you."

"Me?" Her voice was the slightest whisper.

"Yes. You need to be patient, let him come along at his own pace. The flashbacks will happen more quickly if he feels comfortable."

Jamie's head was swimming, and she raked both her hands through her bangs. "I ... I'm not sure I understand."

"He has no memory of being married to you." The doctor met her

eyes and held them. “For the next few months, treat him like a good friend—be kind to him, considerate, answer his questions, help him with his bandages. But don't expect anything more.”

“Meaning ...” Jamie's hands fell to her sides, and her knees felt weak. “Don't talk to him like we're married?”

“Don't

*act* like you are.” The doctor angled his head, and his eyes filled with sympathy. “Do you have a guest room, Mrs. Bryan?”

“A guest room?” He was talking about sleeping arrangements. Something Jamie hadn't considered once since she'd known about Jake's memory loss. She felt the blood rush to her cheeks. “Yes ... Jake's dad is sleeping there.”

“Have him go home. Jake needs to relax and heal. The fewer people around him the better. His memory will return more quickly that way.”

“And ...” Jamie couldn't fathom the direction the conversation was headed. “Have Jake sleep in the guest room?”

“For now.” The doctor put his hand on Jamie's shoulder. “Remember, he doesn't know you, Mrs. Bryan. He won't expect physical contact between the two of you, and I have to ask you not to initiate it. Not even something simple like a hug or kiss. These actions must come from him.”

The heat became a full-fledged blush, one that worked its way down her neck and onto her chest. She felt like a schoolgirl getting a lecture from her father. “Wouldn't ... wouldn't that *help* him remember?”

“It'll mess with his mind and confuse him.” The doctor stuffed both his hands in the pockets of his white jacket. “You'll know his memory is starting to return when those actions come from him, when he initiates them.”

Jamie's shoulders slumped forward some, and a heaviness settled across her shoulders. Pretend she wasn't married to Jake Bryan? The idea was insane. She would have to take Jake home and make him comfortable, but never be anything more to him than a friend? All in the hopes that

somehow, someday his memory would return? “Okay ...” She exhaled and lifted her eyes to the doctor's once more. “You've told me what I can't do. But what can I do ... how do I help him remember?”

“Think back to when you and Jake first fell in love, back before you were dating. If you can interact with him like that, it'll put him at ease and speed his recovery.”

Jamie blinked back tears and leaned against the wall for support. “I was twelve when I fell in love with Jake Bryan, Doctor. Twelve years old.” Her voice was strained, aching from the ocean of tears she was holding in. “How could acting like I did back then help him remember the love we shared last month? What healing could that possibly bring about?”

“The best part of all, Mrs. Bryan.” The doctor spoke straight to her heart. “When a person loses memory of his learned behavior, he has to be taught basic skills again. Yes, eventually he'll remember. But in the meantime he has to be taught. How to sit and stand and feed himself. How to walk.”

Jamie listened, desperate to understand, hanging on every word. “But you're asking me to be Jake's friend and nothing more. What would that possibly teach him?”

“Very simple, Mrs. Bryan.” The doctor narrowed his eyes. “It would teach him to love you.”

That last line was almost more than Jamie could bear. She wanted to break down, collapse in the doctor's arms, and weep for the mountain that lay ahead of them. Jake had always been her support, the one who loved her as easily as he moved. Now, instead of lying in his arms at night, making love to him, or getting lost in his embrace, she would have to be his friend. And, in the process, hope that somehow they'd find the same connection they'd found a lifetime ago, back when they were just kids. And that connection would have to carry them up over the mountain, at least until Jake's memory started to return.

Jamie steeled herself against the hard times still ahead and thanked

the doctor. Then she turned and with slow steps made her way back to Jake's room. Sierra was at home with Jake's father. Jim Bryan had continued to be wonderful, but now—if she wanted to follow the doctor's orders—she would need to send the man away. The idea of bringing Jake home and handling his recovery by herself was daunting, but at least she had another week before it would happen.

She sucked in a slow breath and straightened herself. Act as if she were twelve again? How could she when Jake had shown not even a modicum of interest in her since he'd woken from his coma? Jamie tucked her fears into the back pocket of her heart and entered the room. She didn't have to have all the answers today.

The room whirled with the sound of hospital machines, and the closer Jamie drew to Jake, the stronger the smell of antiseptic got. Jake was asleep, lying on his side facing the window, his face and body utterly still beneath the bandages and sheets.

Jamie sat down and exhaled hard.

As she did she glanced at the table a few feet away and saw Jake's chart. Maybe there was something in it the doctor hadn't told her. She reached for it and let her eyes drift past her husband's name and address, down to the place where Dr. Cleary had written notations about Jake's prognosis. Amnesia ... second-degree burns ... broken ankle.

Suddenly, Jamie's eyes fell on a place in the notes where the doctor had written something about a blood transfusion not being necessary. Next to that he had jotted down Jake's blood type.

O-negative.

Warning bells screamed their alarm through the hallways of Jamie's soul. O-negative wasn't Jake's blood type. He was AB-positive—one of the rarest blood types of all, the type most in need at blood drives. The clipboard in her hands might as well have been coiled and hissing. She dropped it and took four careful steps backwards. Jake's voice—the one he'd had before he was hurt—played in her mind.

“Of course I have rare blood.” He'd told her that a hundred times. He'd lift his chin high, make a fist, and pound it gently against his heart. “When God made me He broke the mold.”

The subject came up often throughout the year, whenever Jake dropped by the Red Cross and donated blood. “What can I say,” he'd tell her when he got home. “I'm a precious commodity.”

It was true. The Red Cross sent him requests often, reminding him that AB-positive was a rare type of blood and virtually begging him to come back in and donate. But now ...

Jamie was grabbing short, quick breaths, and she felt herself fainting. She grabbed the nearest chair and fell into it, dropping her head between her knees to stave off a complete collapse. What could it possibly mean? If the man sleeping in the bed a few feet away had O-negative blood, then he wasn't Jake. And that would explain why he didn't recognize her, why his eyes didn't flash with love the way they always had, as far back as she could remember.

A thin layer of sweat broke out across her forehead, and her mind raced with the possibilities. Maybe Captain Hisel or one of the other guys had said something about Sierra ... maybe that's why he remembered her name.

Or maybe the strain of all that had happened since Tuesday was making her delusional. Maybe she hadn't seen O-negative on the chart, after all. She wanted to stand up, grab the clipboard, and prove herself wrong. Let her eyes find that place on his chart and see once and for all that it actually held the truth. That his blood type was AB-positive.

But she was suddenly paralyzed by a single thought.

If the man in the hospital bed wasn't Jake, if he was someone else with O-negative blood, who by some strange mix-up knew Sierra's name, then that could only mean one thing.

Jake was dead.

And that was a possibility Jamie simply couldn't fathom. So instead

of reaching for the clipboard, she stood and staggered out the door to the nurse's station. Somehow—regardless of what she would find out—she had to know the truth. And since she didn't want to go near the chart, this time she would have a nurse read it.

The moment she walked up to the counter, a nurse stared at her. “Ma'am, are you okay?”

Jamie opened her mouth, but at first nothing came out. Her heart was lodged so high in her throat she couldn't speak. But finally, slowly, the words tumbled from her, words that in all her life were the hardest ones she'd ever spoken.

“I think ...” She leaned on the counter for support. “I think the man in that room might not be my husband.”

## Twintig

17 September 2001

Die dokter se inligting is meer as wat Jamie op een slag kan hanteer.

Maar ná afloop van die naweek – ’n naweek van ’n warboel van gedagtes, is Jamie van een ding seker. Hierdie afspraak met dr. Cleary is die enigste manier waarop hulle vorentoe kan beweeg.

Teen hierdie tyd weet hulle dat Jake uitgevind het hoe hy seergekry het. Benewens die fisiese pyn van sy beserings en die frustrasie van geheueverlies, word hy nou ook gekonfronteer met die enorme omvang van dit wat op 11 September met hom en sy vriende gebeur het.

Jamie sit langs Jake se bed, haar hande op haar skoot gevou. Sy het nie die moed om sy hand vas te hou nie, nie sedert hy wakker geword het nie. Deur die loop van die naweek het Jake ’n paar keer die moeite gedoen om haar ’n vriendelike kyk of selfs ’n halwe glimlag te gee. Maar te oordeel na alles wat hy sê – en nie sê nie – is dit duidelik dat hy haar as ’n vreemdeling beskou. Dr. Cleary het alreeds verduidelik watter soort hoofbesering Jake se geheueverlies verklaar. Nou raak hy spesifiek.

“Kom ons praat oor amnesie.” Hy kyk van Jake na Jamie. “Julle het ’n paar dae gehad om te sien hoe Jake vaar, wat hy onthou.” Die man aarsel. “Ek is seker julle het vrae.”

Jake sit lê op sy bed en hy knik. “Baie.” Sy kop is steeds toegedraai, maar die dokters het die meeste van die verbande om sy arms verwyder en dit met kleiner, pleisteragtige stukke gaas vervang. Hy praat nog in ’n hees stem. “Dit maak nie sin nie, die goed wat ek onthou en nie onthou nie.”

“Ek weet.” Dr. Cleary leun vooroor, ’n ernstige uitdrukking op sy gesig. “Die brein kompartementaliseer inligting, en die geheue is geen uitsondering nie. ’n Gedeelte van jou brein bevat die geheue rondom aangeleerde gedrag – soos om te sit, staan, loop, eet en selfs jou woordeskat. ’n Ander gedeelte bevat die funksionele geheue – taal, die betekenis van verskillende terme en uitdrukkings, die herinneringe aan plekke en roetines.”

“Jake onthou daardie dinge.” Jamie kyk oor haar skouer na hom. “Altans, ek dink so. Is ek reg?”

“Ja.” Jake knik. “En ek onthou alles wat gebeur het sedert ek bygekom het.”

“Presies. ’n Derde van die brein se geheuebank word aan daardie soort herinneringe gewy. Dit word die korttermyngeheue genoem.” Hy plooi sy mond en kyk na Jake. “In jou geval lê ons probleem by die langtermyngeheue – ’n soort verlies wat baie tipies van jou soort hoofbesering is.”

“Ek verstaan nie.” Jamie maak haar oë toe en knyp haar neusbrug tussen haar duim en wysvinger vas. Daar is ’n knop op haar maag toe sy haar hande op haar skoot laat val en weer na die dokter kyk. “As sy langtermyngeheue weg is, hoe kan hy onthou om te eet of die feit dat hy in New York gewerk het?”

Dokter Cleary skuif effens op sy stoel en knik asof hy haar vroeë verwag het. “Die brein beskou daardie herinneringe meer as aangeleerde of funksionele inligting. Dit gebeur af en toe dat iemand met ’n hoofbesering daardie gedeelte van sy geheue ook verloor. Maar langtermyngeheueverlies is iets anders.” Hy bly stil en trek sy asem stadig in. “Dink aan ’n stoorkamer vol inligting oor spesifieke mense, en dinge wat jy saam met daardie mense ervaar het. Dis ’n prentjie van iemand se langtermyngeheue.”

“Is dit wat ek verloor het?” Jake verander van posisie sodat hy gedeeltelik op sy sy lê en kyk na die dokter.

Jamie merk die pyntrek wat steeds op sy gesig verskyn wanneer hy beweeg.

“Beslis nie. Elke herinnering wat jy ooit in jou lewe geskep het, is steeds in daardie stoorkamer.” Die dokter glimlag hartseer. “Maar op die oomblik is die deur gesluit en niemand van ons weet waar die sleutel is nie.”

Jamie vou haar arms en druk met haar vuiste in haar maag. Die inligting is interessant, maar sy het nog steeds nie gehoor wat sy wil, wat sy ter wille van haar selfbehoud móét weet nie. Wanneer sal Jake haar herken? Sy hoës en soek na ’n manier om haar gevoelens te verwoord. “Sê u ... dat hy sy geheue eendag sal herwin?”

“Amper altyd.” Hierdie keer glimlag die dokter breër. “Langtermyngeheueverlies duur gewoonlik nie langer as ses maande nie. Die presiese tyd wissel van pasiënt tot pasiënt, maar die meeste mense wat aan hierdie soort amnesie ly, begin al binne die eerste twee tot drie maande van die herstelproses terugflitse kry.”

“Terugflitse?” Jake vryf versigtig oor sy regtervoorarm. Al het hulle die verbande afgehaal, het daardie arm die ergste brandwonde.

Jamie se hart gaan uit na hom. Sy begin haar hand na sy skouer uitsteek om hom te troos, te wys dat sy jammer is omdat hy seer het. Maar sy bedink

haarself. Enige vorm van toenadering sal Jake net senuweeagtig maak.

Dr. Cleary staan op en loop tot by Jake se bed. Hy kyk van Jake na Jamie. “Terugflitse is definitief deel van die genesingsproses. Dis die brein se manier om die pasiënt deur die venster van die stoorkamer te laat kyk.” Hy kyk Jake in die oë. “Dit kan soms nogal ontstellend wees.”

*Ontstellend?* Jamie se hart mis ’n slag. Wat kan ’n mens banger maak as om in jou man se oë te kyk en nie ’n greintjie herkenning te sien nie? “Hoe?”

“Die eerste herinneringe wat terugkom, is gewoonlik dié naaste aan die punt van geheueverlies.” Dr. Cleary plaas sy hande op die reling langs Jake se bed. “Dit beteken herinneringe aan die ongeluk.”

Wat hy ook al in daardie laaste oomblikke beleef het, dit moes verskriklik wees. Dr. Cleary kyk na Jamie. “Aanvanklik kom die terugflitse net voor of nadat hy geslaap het. Hy sal skielik in die middel van die nag in die bed regop sit of gil.” Hy aarsel. “Jy sal hom daardeur moet help.”

Sy knik.

Dr. Cleary loop na die voetenent van die bed en kyk na Jake se pasiëntekaart. “Dis voorlopig genoeg oor amnesie.” Hy kyk vinnig na Jamie. “Ek sal later ’n bietjie meer met jou daaroor praat. Kom ons gesels eers oor die brandwonde.”

Jamie was so besorg oor haar man se geheueverlies dat sy amper vergeet het sy brandwonde verg ook aandag. Ja, sy het besef dit is pynlik, maar verder het sy nie daaraan gedink nie. Sy vernou haar oë, dankbaar oor die afleiding.

“Hoe voel die vel op jou gesig, Jake?” Die dokter hou sy oë op die kaart terwyl hy weer na die kant van die bed beweeg.

Jake lig sy linkerhand en raak liggies aan die verbande oor sy wange en voorkop. “Dit brand.”

“Dit het gelyk asof jy na die gebou op pad was toe dit neergestort het.” Die dokter buk oor Jake om die hoekie van een van die verbande op Jake se regterarm op te lig. “’n Uitbarsting van warm lug moes jou getref het en onder die brandweerwa ingeslinger het. In die proses het jou arms en gesig gebrand.” Hy kyk na nog ’n wond. “Jou arms is besig om mooi gesond te word. Jy het tweedegraadse brandwonde opgedoen wat beteken dat daar vir die eerste ses maande littekens en ’n diep rooi kleur sal wees. Dit behoort binne die eerste jaar min of meer te verdwyn.”

Hierdie keer loer die dokter onder die verbande op Jake se gesig. “Jy was baie gelukkig met jou gesig. Die vel op jou wange en voorkop het die ergste van die hitte verduur en is na aan derdegraadse brandwonde.” Hy staan regop en kyk weer na die knyperbord. “Die soort verbande wat ons gebruik, help baie. Ek dink nie ’n veloorplanting sal nodig wees nie.”

“Wat van littekens?” Jamie wil nie vra nie, maar sy moet. Dit was Jake se gesig wat haar destyds op hom verlief gemaak het toe hulle tieners was. Nie dat dit saak maak nie; sy sal Jake liefhê, maak nie saak hoe hy lyk nie. Maar sy moet weet.

“Daar sal wees.” Die dokter laat sak die kaart en hou dit langs sy sy. “Maar niks drasties nie. Oor ’n jaar of wat sal jy mooi moet kyk om enigiets te sien.



Sy keel en longe het natuurlik ook skade opgedoen. Dit is deur dieselfde warm lug gebrand.”

“Is dit waarom ek so klink?” Jake vat aan sy keel. “En hoekom ek nie lekker kan asemhaal nie?”

“Ja. Maar dit sal regkom.” Dr. Cleary knik. “Ons het jou longe met vogtige lug behandel, en sal vir die volgende week of wat daarmee volhou. Daarna sal jy baie beter voel. Ons sal dan eers weet of daar permanente skade aan jou stem is, maar dit sal nie jou ontslag beïnvloed nie.” Hy staan terug en kyk na Jamie. “Die operasiewonde is ook besig om goed te herstel, en sy breingrootte is terug na normaal.” Hy druk sy los hand in een van sy jassakke. “As daar geen verdere veranderinge is nie, kan jy volgende Maandag of Dinsdag huis toe gaan.”

Jamie wil-wil paniekerig raak en sy vou haar arms styf om haar middel. Hoe is sy veronderstel om Jake huis toe te neem as hy haar nie onthou nie? “So ... so gou?” Sy vang Jake se oog en merk dieselfde vrees by hom.

“Ja.” Die dokter gee Jake ’n nadruklike kyk. “Hoe gouer jy jou in ’n bekende omgewing bevind – selfs een wat jy nie nou kan onthou nie – hoe gouer sal jou geheue terugkom.” Hy glimlag en sit die kaart op ’n tafel neer. “Hoekom probeer jy nie ’n bietjie slaap nie, Jake? Ek en Jamie gaan net hier buite gesels.”

Jamie gaan saam met die dokter uit, maar sy voel lighoofdig en afgestomp. Asof sy steeds nie kan glo dat dit haar lewe is nie. Jake? Jake, die liefde van haar lewe, herken haar nie? Dis asof iemand haar ’n wrede streep getrek het. Hulle loop ’n entjie in die gang af voordat dr. Cleary na haar draai. “Ek moet met jou eerlik wees, mev. Bryan. Daar is baie van Jake se herstel wat van jou afhang.”

“My?” Haar stem is ’n fluistering.

“Ja. Jy moet geduldig wees, hom teen sy eie pas laat vorder. Die terugflitse sal vroeër kom as hy gemaklik voel.”

Jamie se kop draai en sy trek albei haar hande deur haar kuif. “Ek’s ... ek’s nie seker ek verstaan nie.”

“Hy het geen herinnering aan sy huwelik met jou nie.” Die dokter hou haar oë gevange. “Vir die volgende paar maande moet jy hom soos ’n goeie vriend behandel – wees vriendelik, bedagsaam, beantwoord sy vrae, help hom met sy verbande. Maar moenie iets meer verwag nie.”

“Dokter bedoel ... ” Jamie se hande val na haar sye en haar knieë voel swak. “Ek moenie met hom praat asof ons getroud is nie?”

“Moenie *optree* asof julle is nie.” Die dokter se oë is simpatiek. “Het julle ’n gastekamer, mev. Bryan?”

“’n Gastekamer?” Die dokter praat van slaapreëlins. Iets waaraan Jamie nog nie gedink het sedert sy van Jake se geheueverlies uitgevind het nie. Sy voel hoe die hitte oor haar wange versprei. “Ja ... Jake se pa slaap op die oomblik daar.”

“Laat hom huis toe gaan. Jake moet ontspan en gesond word. Hoe minder

mense rondom hom is, hoe beter. Dit sal maak dat sy geheue vinniger terugkom.”

“En ...” Jamie kan nie glo waarheen die gesprek op pad is nie. “En Jake moet in die gastekamer slaap?”

“Voorlopig.” Die dokter plaas sy hand op Jamie se skouer. “Onthou, hy ken jou nie, mev. Bryan. Hy is nog nie gereed vir fisiese kontak nie, en ek moet u vra om dit nie te inisieer nie. Nie eens iets so eenvoudig soos ’n drukkies of ’n soen nie. Enige so iets moet van hom af kom.”

Die hitte verander in ’n vlamrooi blos wat tot in haar hals afkruip. Sy voel soos ’n skoolmeisie wat by haar pa ’n lesing kry. “Sal ... sal dit hom nie *help* onthou nie?”

“Dit sal hom net verwar.” Die dokter druk albei hande in die sakke van sy wit jas. “Jy sal weet dat sy geheue begin terugkom wanneer hierdie aksies van hom af kom, wanneer hy toenadering soek.”

Jamie se skouers hang asof ’n swaar gewig daarop rus. Moet sy voorgee dat sy nie met Jake Bryan getroud is nie? Dis absurd. Moet sy Jake huis toe neem en sorg dat hy gemaklik is, maar nooit meer as susterlik teenoor hom optree nie? Alles in die hoop dat hy sy geheue iewers eendag sal herwin? “Nou goed ...” Sy blaas haar asem uit en kyk weer op in die dokter se oë. “Nou weet ek wat ek nie kan doen nie. Maar wat kan ek doen ... hoe help ek hom om te onthou?”

“Dink terug aan toe jy en Jake verlief geraak het, nog voor julle uitgegaan het. As jy op daardie manier teenoor hom optree, sal dit hom op sy gemak stel en sy herstel bespoedig.”

Jamie knip haar oë teen die trane en leun teen die muur vir ondersteuning. “Ek was twaalf toe ek op Jake Bryan verlief geraak het, Dokter. Twaalf jaar oud.” Haar stem is stram, seer van die ongestorte trane. “Ek kan tog nie deur só op te tree hom aan ons volwasse liefde herinner nie. Ek kan my nie indink dat dit sy genesing sal aanhelp nie.”

“O, maar dit sal, mev. Bryan.” Dit voel asof die dokter sy woorde direk tot haar hart rig. “Wanneer iemand die geheue van sy aangeleerde gedrag verloor, moet hy die basiese vaardighede van voor af aanleer. Ja, uiteindelik sal hy onthou. Maar in die tussentyd moet hy geleer word. Hoe om te sit en te staan en self te eet. Hoe om te loop.”

Jamie hang aan die dokter se woorde, desperaat om te verstaan. “Maar u verwag van my om niks meer as ’n vriendin vir Jake te wees nie. Wat sal dit hom leer?”

“Baie eenvoudig, mev. Bryan.” Die dokter vernou sy oë. “Dit sal hom leer om jou lief te hê.”

Sy laaste woorde is meer as wat Jamie kan verduur. Sy wil haar in die dokter se arms werp en in trane uitbars en huil oor die berg wat voor hulle lê. Jake was nog altyd haar steunpilaar, die man wat haar met sy hele wese liefgehad het. En nou, in plaas daarvan om snags in sy arms te lê, met hom liefde te maak of haar in sy arms te verloor, moet sy sy vriendin wees. En in die proses

hoop dat hulle dieselfde band sal ontdek wat daar 'n leeftyd gelede tussen hulle ontstaan het toe hulle net kinders was. Daardie band sal hulle oor die berg moet dra, ten minste totdat Jake se geheue begin terugkeer.

Jamie staal haar teen die swaar tye wat voorlê en bedank die dokter. Toe draai sy om en loop stadig na Jake se kamer. Sierra is tuis by Jake se pa. Jim Bryan was in hierdie tyd so goed vir haar, maar nou – as sy die dokter se voorskrifte wil volg – moet sy die man wegstuur. Sy voel oorweldig as sy daaraan dink dat sy Jake moet huis toe neem en sy herstel op haar eie moet hanteer. Genadiglik het sy nog 'n week voordat dit gebeur.

Sy trek haar asem in en maak haar skouers reguit. Die dokter wil hê sy moet optree soos toe sy twaalf was. Hoe gaan sy dit doen as Jake nog nie 'n beduidenis van belangstelling in haar getoon het nadat hy uit die koma wakker geword het nie? Jamie skuif haar vrese opsy toe sy by die kamer ingaan. Sy hoef nie vandag al die antwoorde te hê nie.

Die geluid van monitors en hospitaalmasjiene begroet Jamie toe sy in die kamer kom, en hoe nader sy aan Jake loop, hoe sterker word die reuk van antiseptikum. Jake slaap, sy gesig en liggaam doodstil onder die verbande en lakens.

Jamie gaan sit en sug swaar.

Haar oë dwaal ingedagte deur die vertrek en val dan op Jake se pasiëntekaart waar die dokter dit op die tafel gelos het. Dalk is daar iets geskryf wat die dokter nie vir haar gesê het nie. Sy neem die knyperbord en haar oë beweeg oor haar man se naam en adres na waar dr. Cleary aantekeninge oor Jake se prognose gemaak het. Amnesie ... tweedegraadse brandwonde ... 'n gebreekte enkel.

Skielik val Jamie se oë op 'n reël waar die dokter iets oor 'n bloedoortapping geskryf het, dat dit nie nodig is nie. Langsaan het hy Jake se bloedgroep neergeskryf.

O-negatief.

Dis asof 'n sirene in Jamie se gedagtes begin loei. Jake is nie O-negatief nie. Hy is AB-positief – een van die seldsaamste bloedgroepe, hoog in aanvraag by die bloedbank. Die knyperbord kan netsowel 'n slang gewees het. Sy laat val dit en retireer behoedsaam. Jake se stem – sy stem voordat hy beseer is – weerklink in haar gedagtes.

“Natuurlik het ek 'n seldsame bloed,” het hy hoeveel keer vir haar gesê. Dan het hy homself gemaak trots op die hart geklop. “Toe God my gemaak het, het Hy weggebreek van tradisie.”

Die onderwerp het dikwels ter sprake gekom, telkens wanneer hy by die Rooikruis gaan bloed skenk het. “Wat kan ek sê?” het hy gegrap wanneer hy by die huis kom. “My soort is yl gesaai.”

Dit is waar. Die Rooikruis stuur dikwels versoekbriewe waarin hulle hom daaraan herinner dat AB-positief 'n seldsame bloedgroep is, en hom dan so te sê smee om te kom bloed skenk. Maar nou ...

Jamie haal al hoe vinniger asem en sy voel hoe die kamer om haar begin

draai. Sy gaan sit op die naaste stoel en laat sak haar kop tussen haar knieë om te keer dat sy flou word. Wat op aarde kan dit beteken? As die man wat op die bed 'n paar treë van haar af slaap, O-negatief is, is hy nie Jake nie. Dit sal verklaar waarom hy haar nie ken nie, waarom sy oë nie opflikker wanneer hy haar sien nie.

'n Dun lagie sweet vorm op haar voorkop en verskillende moontlikhede flits deur haar gedagtes. Dalk het kaptein Hisel of een van die ander ouens iets van Sierra vir die man gesê ... dalk is dit waarom hy haar naam onthou.

Of dalk het die spanning van alles sedert Dinsdag se gebeure haar verstand aangetas. Dalk het sy nie regtig "O-negatief" op die kaart gesien nie. Sy wil opstaan, die bord gryp en haarself verkeerd bewys. Sy wil haar oë weer na sy kaart dwing om eens en vir altyd te sien dat sy verkeerd gelees het. Dat sy bloedgroep wel AB-positief is.

Maar 'n verlammende gedagte neem van haar besit.

As die man op die hospitaalbed nie Jake is nie, as hy iemand anders met O-negatiewe bloed is wat om die een of ander rede Sierra se naam ken, kan dit net een ding beteken.

Jake is dood.

En dit is iets waaraan Jamie nie kan dink nie. In plaas daarvan om die knyperbord op te tel, steier sy dus na die verpleegsterstasie toe. Ongeag wat sy gaan uitvind, sy moet weet wat die waarheid is. En aangesien sy nie naby die pasiëntekaart wil kom nie, sal sy 'n verpleegster moet vra om dit hierdie keer te lees.

Toe sy die toonbank bereik, staar die verpleegster na haar. "Mevrou, is daar fout?"

Jamie maak haar mond oop, maar aanvanklik kom daar niks uit nie. Haar hart sit so hoog in haar keel dat sy nie kan praat nie. Maar uiteindelik begin die woorde stadig kom, en in haar hele lewe moes Jamie nog nooit so 'n moeilike sin uiter nie.

"Ek dink ..." Sy moet aan die toonbank vashou. "Ek dink die man in daardie kamer is dalk nie my man nie."

# Chapter TWENTY-ONE

SEPTEMBER 17, 2001

The nurse gave Jamie a strange look, one that quickly became a confused smile.

“I’m not sure I understand.”

“Look ...” Every word was a struggle. “I feel like I’m losing my mind.” Jamie could feel her heart racing, and she pointed across the hall toward the bedroom where the man lay. “I need ... I need you to check his chart. Please ...” The last word was more of a cry, and in that instant compassion cracked the woman’s expression.

“First ... are you sure you’re okay?”

“No!” Jamie’s voice was louder now. “I’m not okay. I need you to tell me that the man in that room is my husband!” Her voice softened, and she gripped the counter to keep from falling. “Please.”

This time the nurse didn’t hesitate. She came out from behind the nurse’s station and led the way back to the hospital room. “What gave you the idea he might not be your husband?”

“His blood type. It’s written on his chart.” That was all Jamie could manage. She followed the nurse back to the room, her body shaking with the fear of what might lie ahead.

The nurse picked up the clipboard while Jamie’s eyes found him in the hospital bed. The woman’s eyebrows knit together as she held it up and looked at the information it contained. What if all this time he’d been merely a confused stranger ... and what if Jake had been halfway up the building with Larry and the others? She held her breath while the nurse scanned the information on the chart.

What the woman was about to say would change Jamie’s life forever.

She looked up, the confusion gone from her expression, and pointed to a spot halfway down the first page. “You mean here? Where it says O-

negative?”

Jamie couldn't speak. She could barely breathe. Instead, she leaned against the chair and nodded.

A pleasant look filled the woman's face. “In the wake of a big accident, someone from the emergency room staff does a blood check and writes down the type that person should get if a transfusion is needed. O-negative works for every blood type.”

“But ...” Jamie's teeth rattled, and she hugged herself to ward off the sudden chill. “But my husband's blood is AB-positive.”

“Well, then”—this time the nurse smiled—“that would explain it.”

Jamie was baffled, but she felt better. If only there was an explanation for the error, then everything was okay. “I'm not sure I understand.”

“AB-positive is a very rare blood type.”

“Yes.” Hope lit a candle in the pitch-black part of her soul.

“Most likely they drew his blood in the emergency room and realized his type was rare. With a disaster like what happened Tuesday, they would've written down simply O-negative, meaning if he needs blood, give him the universal donor type because his is so rare.”

Jamie stared at the woman, and her heart skittered back into a normal rhythm. “So you don't think there's been a mix-up?”

“No, of course not. I've never heard of such a thing.” The woman looked over her shoulder at Jake and then back at Jamie. “But you would know better than any of us.”

Jamie nodded, and the nurse gave her one more smile before returning Jake's clipboard back to the hook at the end of his bed. When she was gone, Jamie sat motionless and straight, watching Jake with an uncertainty that hadn't been there before. Was there no end to the wild emotions she'd suffered since the terrorist attacks? First thinking Jake was dead, and then getting the call that he was in the hospital. The race to be by his side, only to have him wake up not knowing her or anything about his life. Never in the midst of the whirlwind of tragedy and sorrow did she ever consider

there might've been a mix-up.

That the man lying there beneath the hospital sheets was anyone other than her husband.

She studied him and tried to remember the strapping, jovial man who'd walked out of their bedroom early Tuesday morning. The man in the hospital bed had Jake's size, the right length and body structure, from what she could see. The muscled arms and shoulders were his, the narrow feet. Certainly his eyes were the right color, though without the benefit of memories there was nothing familiar about them.

The nurse's words ran in Jamie's mind again. *No, of course there hadn't been a mix-up ... something like that had never happened before.*

But it could, couldn't it? Wasn't it possible?

Suddenly, Jamie remembered something she'd seen on television that morning while she was getting ready to come to the hospital. Grieving family members were flocking to the V.A. Hospital on First Avenue, taping photos and flyers of their loved ones to the hospital's red brick wall. Hundreds were being added each day as desperate people held out a fraction of hope that maybe ... just maybe ... their son or daughter or husband or wife was not among the thousands feared dead.

"Missing ..." the flyers read. As though perhaps one of those who went to work at the World Trade Center Tuesday morning might have found his or her way out alive only to lie unidentified in a hospital or to wander the streets, the victim of a traumatic head injury.

Or mistaken identify.

A shudder worked its way down Jamie's spine. There was only one way to know for sure, to be certain there wasn't some desperate soul roaming Manhattan looking for a man who had Jake's build and appearance. She left without saying good-bye and took a cab to the area near the hospital where the flyers were posted. If she'd been a praying woman, this would have been her direst hour, the moment when she would've begged God to let this be the craziest thing she'd ever done, to

assure her that not one missing person pictured on the wall looked even remotely like Jake.

But she wasn't someone who prayed, and she was hardly going to start now. Especially in light of all that had happened.

Jamie paid the driver and stumbled from the cab, her feet and head moving at frantic but different paces. She'd once watched a scene from a movie where the main character's child was missing. The actress darted first in one direction, then another and another, her eyes shining with raw fear.

That was how Jamie felt now.

She wore brown loafers, tailored jeans, a turtleneck, and a navy pullover sweater, the type of tailored outfit Staten Island mothers wore to do their grocery shopping. But there was nothing conservative about how she worked her way through the crowd, darting and weaving herself closer to the place where the flyers were posted.

Finally, she found a spot near the beginning of the wall, and she stopped, stunned. Only then did she realize how desperate the situation truly was. Smiling at her from the wall were hundreds of faces, one after the other. Pretty young women in the arms of their lovers, proud men with babies cradled against their chests, happy-faced gray-haired folks captured at a recent vacation spot or sitting with family at a barbecue.

Everyday people who'd done nothing more crazy than show up for work one day. And now they were gone. Clearly most of them were dead. Yet somewhere in the city someone had loved them enough to print up the flyer and post it, missed them enough to hope against all reason that somehow the person they loved might somehow still be found.

Jamie was barely breathing. She worked her way down the wall, taking in face after face after face. Most of the flyers listed the person's name, their height and weight, and the company and floor they worked for at the World Trade Center. Every few steps Jamie took, she'd have another two dozen flyers to look at. Finally, after an hour she'd looked at every



single flyer, let her eyes wash over the faces of more missing people than she could possibly fathom.

And not one of them looked anything like Jake.

Jamie turned to summon a cab, but she could manage only to fall onto a nearby bench. For all the times she'd run a race or played a basketball game or ran a jet ski all afternoon without a break, Jamie had never felt more exhausted. Her arms and legs shook, and her temples pounded. As bad as she felt, as awful as the wall had been to look at, one bit of truth sustained her.

Jake was alive.

He had to be. Captain Hisel had found him under the fire truck and recognized him immediately. No doubts whatsoever, and that was before they'd bandaged Jake's face. Clearly the man must've been Jake—his hair and build and eyes, his way of carrying himself. Otherwise, the captain wouldn't have known him.

And of course there was the other bit of irrefutable information—the fact that Jake knew Sierra—both her face and her name.

Jamie focused on the people milling about. Nothing about Manhattan looked like it had before the terrorist attacks. Ash and smoke still hung in the air, and groups of people stood in clusters along the wall and adjacent sidewalk. Many of them were weeping.

Jamie watched them until she couldn't stand to look any longer. She covered her face with her hands and closed her eyes, her breath jagged and shaky. Was she crazy, coming all the way down here to check a wall of missing people flyers? Of course the man lying in the hospital bed was Jake. All the proof was there. And the nurse had explained the situation with the blood type. Everything made perfect sense.

She lifted her head and peered through the spaces between her fingers. A woman about her age stood near one of the flyers, her head hung as quiet sobs racked her body. One of her hands was tucked deep in the pocket of a long jacket. But the other covered the face of the person on the flyer, as

though by keeping her hand there this woman could somehow connect with the person she was missing.

Jamie wanted to go to the woman, put an arm around her and comfort her, promise her everything was going to turn out okay. But it wasn't—not for any of the people standing near missing persons' flyers or tacking them along the brick wall. Jamie inhaled, and pungent air filled her lungs. She stood, turned her back to the grieving stranger, and waved for a cab.

She had nothing to say to the woman, no words of comfort. After all, no matter how badly Jamie hurt for her, the two of them had nothing in common. Jamie was one of the lucky ones, and though she and Jake would face losses, none of them would be permanent. No, she need not spend any more time swimming in this sea of sorrow, fighting the tide of death. Not when her husband was alive in a hospital room a few miles away.

It was time to get back there and do whatever it took not only to teach Jake Bryan how to live with her again.

But how to love her.

That night when she was back at home, when Jim and Sierra were asleep, Jamie climbed into her sweats and T-shirt and crawled into bed. And there she began a strange sort of rehearsal, imagining how the coming weeks would go once Jake came home. How would she help him remember who he was, help him find the place where his laugh and smile came easily, the place where giving Sierra horsey rides was as natural as his name?

She thought of something then, something that hadn't come to mind since Jake had been hurt. Jamie leaned over, flipped on the bedside light, and sat up. Every morning as far back as she could remember, Jake had spent the early morning hours reading his Bible and jotting things down in his journal.

A time or two, Jamie had been tempted to take a look, tempted to see exactly what thoughts stirred in the heart of the man she loved more than life. But the idea of looking at Jake's private thoughts had never sat well

with Jamie's conscience, and the occasional notion had never been more than that—a simple, wayward idea that she quickly dismissed.

But now ... now things were different.

If she was going to teach Jake how to be himself again, she would need all the help she could get. And what could be more helpful than having access to his deepest thoughts and writings, words that might indeed trigger the return of Jake's complete memory?

She slid off the bed and ran with light steps around to Jake's side. Then she stooped down and pulled two books from underneath the box springs, books that Jake had left there that Tuesday morning before he went to work.

One was black leather with Jake's name engraved in gold at the bottom right corner. It was the Bible he'd gotten from his father his first day with the FDNY. Part of the lettering was worn off, so that all Jamie could clearly see were the capital *T* and *B*.

*Appropriate*, she thought. Since that's what the guys at the station called him. *TB*. She opened the front cover, and there inside, scribbled on paper that was transparently thin, was this inscription: *To Jake ... No matter what else happens, the words in this book will keep you safe. I love you, Dad.*

Did Jim Bryan know that Jake still had this old book, that he still read it every morning before work? And how come she'd never taken an interest before, never wanted to look at it or read the inscription written inside? It was one thing to stay away from his journal ... but his Bible? That would've been okay, except for one thing.

She'd never wanted anything to do with it.

Jim Bryan's words caught her attention again, and then she knew the reason why she'd never touched it. Because as nice as it all seemed, there wasn't any truth to the sentiment Jake's father had written. The words in the Bible wouldn't keep a firefighter or anyone else safe. They were just words, after all, no matter how nice they sounded. Larry believed in God, didn't

he? And where had Bible verses gotten him? Buried beneath the rubble of a hundred-story building, that's where.

Nothing safe about that.

A sigh slipped from Jamie's lips, and she thumbed through the thin, worn pages. Toward the back of the book, there were whole sections of text Jake had underlined or highlighted in yellow. Notations were written in the sidelines, and as she flipped, one page caught her attention. She stopped and held the Bible up a few inches closer to her face so she could see it clearly.

The heading at the top of the page read "Matthew."

Jamie felt awkward, ignorant looking at the text now. Other than the time when she'd attended youth camp with Jake, she'd never opened a Bible, never taken the time to know the names of the various chapters or what they represented. Now—seeing Jake's notes and highlighted areas—she chided herself about the fact. Clearly, her husband's heart was very taken with the importance of this material. Couldn't she have at least shown some kind of interest? Even if she and Jake didn't agree about the significance it held?

Her eyes narrowed and she read the verse. It was from a section marked Eleven.

*Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.*

A strange feeling worked its way into Jamie's heart, a faint but different kind of peace, a peace she'd never known before. For a moment Jamie almost wished the text were true. Perfectly true the way Jake thought it to be. Strange, really. Because Jamie had never believed the Bible to be more than a series of nice letters about a nice man. Some details true in a historical sense, some not true. But definitely nothing more than that.

She scanned the text a few verses up until she was clear that the person talking in that section of text was Jesus. Everything about the words

seemed warm and wonderful—especially the part about getting rest for her soul. But that wasn't what Jake had underlined. The part that had apparently touched him the most were these three words:

Learn from me...

And there in the margins next to the verse, Jake had written, *My goal: learn everything I can from Jesus.*

Jamie's gaze shifted to the underlined text once more. *Learn from me ... learn everything I can from Jesus ...*

That was what had motivated Jake all these years, wasn't it? He kept no secrets from her. Some nights after they'd been intimate, in the quiet waning moments before sleep found them both, she'd whisper into his ear.

"I'm the luckiest woman in the world, Jake. You know that?"

But he'd only put his arm around her and hold her close, his starlit smile illuminating the depths of her heart. "God brought us together. All I want now is to be a man that makes Him proud. You know, a little more like Jesus every day."

Jamie sat straighter on the edge of the bed. Those were the same words he'd said every time she complimented his skills as a father. "As long as I can be like Jesus, I'll be okay."

Now it was all coming together in a way that made goose bumps rise along Jamie's arms. All his life Jake had studied Jesus Christ, and in the process—though Jamie didn't hold to her husband's beliefs—Jake had taken on some of the mannerisms and actions of Jesus. It was part of who he was as a man, a husband, and a father. And now ... now that he'd forgotten who he was, what better way for him to learn than to read the highlighted sections of text in his old Bible—memorize it, soak it in, go over once more the notations in the margins? The information nestled between the leather covers of his Bible might actually be a road map of sorts, a guide to help him remember who he was and help him become that person once more.

Carefully, as though the book was worth more now, Jamie shut the

Bible and opened the other book, Jake's journal. Again she was poked by pushpins of guilt, but nothing strong enough to stop her. The pages, after all, contained Jake's deepest stirrings, the thoughts and feelings at the center of his heart. Combined with the information in the Bible, there wasn't anything Jamie could say or do that would better serve to help Jake remember who he was.

She flipped through dozens of entries until she found the one he'd written that last morning, the morning of the terrorist attacks. The other entries, the ones she'd passed on the way to this one, were for the most part merely solid blocks of wording. But the one dated September 11, 2001, was a letter.

A letter written to her.

Tears stung Jamie's eyes and blurred her vision. She blinked them back, and when she could see clearly again she began to read.

*Dear sweet Jamie,*

*I have this feeling, deep in my heart, that something's about to change for me and you. Maybe it's your questions about church or the way you seem to hang on to Sierra's Bible stories a little bit longer these days. Whatever it is, I've prayed for God to touch your heart, baby. He means everything to me, and I know that one day He'll mean everything to you too. On that day, you'll no longer have to be afraid because you'll have God Almighty to lean on. I want you to know, honey, that when you find that precious faith, I'll be smiling bigger than you've ever seen me smile. Because the thing I want even more than your love is the knowledge that we'll have eternity together.*

*I simply cannot bear the idea of being in heaven without you. I love you too much to lose you.*

The letter went on, but Jamie's tears made it impossible for her to see. She shut the journal, stacked it on top of Jake's Bible, and slipped the books back under the bed where Jake had last left them.

Sweet, wonderful Jake. Always thinking about her.

He had always been so good about keeping his faith to himself, careful not to badger her or preach at her. Here, though ... here was his heart. Not that she take up some ritualistic form of faith to appease him. But that she believe—so that by his understanding of life and death and eternity, they would never, ever be apart. In his own crazy mixed-up way, he loved her that deeply. God, Sierra, and her. Those were his life, and together they made up the core of who he was. After reading his words, Jamie understood that better than she ever had before.

Now she would simply have to help him understand it too.

## Een-en-twintig

17 September 2001

Die verpleegster gee Jamie 'n vreemde kyk wat vinnig in 'n verwarde glimlag verander.

“Ek’s nie seker ek verstaan nie.”

“Asseblief ... ” Elke woord is 'n worsteling. “Dit voel asof ek besig is om mal te word.” Jamie se hart klop vinnig en sy wys na die kamer waar die man lê. “As jy ... as jy net na sy kaart kan gaan kyk. Asseblief ... ” Die woorde is amper 'n snik en die verpleegster se gesig raak vol deernis.

“Eers ... is jy seker jy’s oukei?”

“Nee!” Jamie se stem is te hard. “Ek’s nie oukei nie. Ek wil hê jy moet vir my sê of die man in daardie kamer Jake Bryan is!” Haar stem versag en sy hou aan die toonbank vas. “Asseblief.”

Hierdie keer weifel die verpleegster nie. Sy kom agter die toonbank uit en loop vooruit na die kamer. “Wat laat jou dink dat hy nie jou man is nie?”

“Sy bloedgroep. Dit staan op sy kaart.” Dis al wat Jamie uitkry. Sy volg die verpleegster terug na die kamer toe. Haar hele liggaam bewe van angns oor wat dalk voorlê.

Die verpleegster tel die knyperbord op terwyl Jamie na die man in die hospitaalbed kyk. Daar is 'n frons op die vrou se gesig terwyl sy die inligting op sy kaart bestudeer. Sê nou hy is net 'n verwarde vreemdeling ... en sê nou Jake was saam met Larry en die ander halfpad in die gebou op? Sy hou haar asem op terwyl die verpleegster die kaart deurlees.

Die verpleegster se volgende woorde gaan Jamie se hele lewe verander.

Sy kyk op, die verwarring weg uit haar gesig en sy wys na 'n plek in die middel van die eerste bladsy. “Jy bedoel hier? Waar daar O-negatief staan?”

Jamie kan nie praat nie. Sy kan skaars asemhaal. Sy leun teen die stoel en knik.

Die vrou se gesig ontspan. “Na afloop van ’n groot ongeluk word daar in ongevallen ’n bloettoets gedoen, en word daar ’n aantekening van die soort bloed gemaak wat daardie persoon moet kry indien ’n bloedoortapping gedoen moet word. O-negatief werk vir al die bloedgroepe.”

“Maar ... ” Jamie se tande klap opmekaar, en sy het haar arms om haarself geslaan om die skielike koue af te weer. “Maar my man is AB-positief.”

“Nou ja,” glimlag die verpleegster, “dit verklaar alles.”

Jamie is verbyster, maar sy voel beter. Solank daar net ’n verklaring is, is alles in orde. “Ek verstaan nie heeltemal nie.”

“AB-positief is ’n baie seldsame bloedgroep.”

“Ja.” Dit voel asof iemand ’n liggie in haar donker binnekant aangesteek het.

“Hulle het waarskynlik sy bloed getrek en besef dat hy aan ’n seldsame bloedgroep behoort. Teen die agtergrond van ’n ramp soos dié van Dinsdag, sou hulle eenvoudig O-negatief geskryf het, menende indien hy bloed sou benodig, hulle hom van die universele bloedgroep moet gee omdat syne so seldsaam is.”

Jamie kyk met groot oë na die vrou en haar hart klop nie meer so vreeslik wild nie. “Met ander woorde, jy dink nie daar was ’n vergissing nie?”

“Nee, natuurlik nie. Ek het nog nooit van so iets gehoor nie.” Die verpleegster kyk oor haar skouer na Jake en toe weer na Jamie. “Maar jy sal beter as enigeen van ons weet.”

Jamie knik, en die verpleegster gee haar ’n laaste glimlag voordat sy Jake se pasiëntekaart weer aan die voetenent van sy bed gaan bêre. Toe sy uit is, sit Jamie bewegingloos op die regop stoel en kyk na Jake met ’n onsekerheid wat vroeër nie daar was nie. Is daar geen einde aan die wilde emosies wat sy sedert die terroriste-aanval verduur nie? Eers was daar die vrees dat Jake dood was, toe die oproep dat hy in die hospitaal is. Die gejaag om by hom te wees, toe die besef dat hy niks van haar of sy lewe onthou nie. Te midde van al die tragedie en hartseer het sy nooit kon dink dat die man voor haar dalk nié haar man kon wees nie.

Sy bestudeer hom en probeer die aantreklike, joviale man onthou wat vroeg Dinsdagoggend by die huis weg is. Sover sy kan uitmaak, het die man in die hospitaalbed dieselfde lengte en bou as Jake. Die gespierde arms en skouers is syne, die smal voete. Sy oë is beslis die regte kleur; dis die gebrek aan herinneringe wat hulle so onbekend laat lyk.

*Die verpleegster se woorde kom na haar toe terug. Nee, natuurlik nie. Ek het nog nooit van so iets gehoor nie.*

Maar dit kan seker gebeur. Dis tog nie onmoontlik nie.

Skielik onthou Jamie iets wat sy daardie oggend op televisie gesien het terwyl sy besig was om reg te maak om hospitaal toe te kom. Daar was ’n toneel van bedroefde familieledes wat na die hospitaal in First Avenue toe stroom en foto’s en strooibiljette van hulle geliefdes teen die rooi baksteenmuur vasplak. Honderde word elke dag bygevoeg deur desperate mense wat bly hoop dat hulle seun of dogter of man of vrou dalk, net dalk nie onder die oorledenes is



nie.

“Gesoeek ... ” lees die strooibiljette. Asof een van die mense wat Dinsdagoggend by die World Trade Center gaan werk het, dalk lewend daar uitgekóm het, net om ongeïdentifiseerd in ’n hospitaal op te eindig of deur die strate te loop, die slagoffer van ’n traumatiese hoofbesering.

Of wat verkeerdelik geïdentifiseer is.

Jamie ril. Daar is net een manier om doodseker te maak daar dwaal nie ’n desperate persoon deur Manhattan, op soek na iemand met Jake se liggaamsbou en voorkoms nie. Sy loop sonder om totsiens te sê en neem ’n taxi na die plek naby die hospitaal waar die blaadjies opgeplak is. As sy in gebed geglo het, sou sy God in hierdie donkerste uur gesmeek het dat dit die absurdste ding moet wees wat sy al ooit gedoen het, dat Hy haar die versekering sou gee nie een van die vermiste mense teen die muur sal naastenby soos Jake lyk nie.

Maar sy is nie iemand wat bid nie, en sy gaan definitief nie nou begin nie. Veral nie teen die agtergrond van alles wat gebeur het nie.

Jamie betaal die bestuurder en strompel amper uit die motor. Haar voete en kop beweeg koorsagtig, maar nie gesinchroniseerd nie. Sy het eenmaal ’n toneel in ’n flik gesien waar die hoofkarakter se kind weg was. Die aktrise het in een rigting gehardloop, omgeswaai, en weer en weer van rigting verander.

Dis hoe Jamie nou voel.

Sy dra bruin slenterskoene, jeans, ’n polonek-top en ’n vlootblou oortrektrui, asof sy gou uit is om kruideniersware te gaan koop. Maar daar is niks voorstedelik aan die manier waarop sy haar weg deur die mense baan en angstig deur die omstanders vleg om nader aan die muur te kom waar die strooibiljette aangebring is nie.

Uiteindelik kry sy ’n plek naby die begin van die muur en sy steek geskok vas. Sy besef nou eers hoe desperaat die situasie werklik is. Sy word deur honderde glimlaggende gesigte teen die muur begroet. ’n Mooi jong vrou in haar man se arms, ’n trotse pa met ’n baba teen sy bors, ’n gelukkige gryskoppaartjie tydens ’n onlangse vakansie of saam met die familie by ’n braai.

Doodgewone mense wat Dinsdagoggend werk toe gegaan het. En nou is hulle weg. Die meeste van hulle is waarskynlik dood. Tog is daar iemand in die stad wat hulle só liefhet dat hulle ’n strooibiljet gedruk en dit hier kom opplak het, wat hulle só mis dat hulle ’n wanhopige hoop koester dat hulle geliefde op ’n manier steeds opgespoor sal word.

Jamie kan skaars asemhaal. Sy beweeg langs die muur af, verby die een na die ander gesig. Die meeste strooibiljette lys die persoon se naam, hulle lengte en gewig en die maatskappy en vloer waar hulle in die World Trade Center gewerk het. Vir elke paar treë wat Jamie gee, is daar nog ’n dosyn of wat biljette waarna sy moet kyk. Na ’n uur het sy uiteindelik na elke liewe blaadjie gekyk en meer vermiste mense gesien as wat sy haar ooit kon indink. En nie een van hulle lyk enigins soos Jake nie.

Jamie draai weg om vir 'n taxi te wink, maar sy het net genoeg krag om op 'n nabygeleë bankie neer te sak. Sy was nog nooit so gedaan nie, nie nadat sy 'n wedloop gehardloop het of basketbal gespeel het of die hele middag op die waterponie was nie. Haar arms en bene ruk en haar slape klop. Maar ongeag hoe aaklig sy voel en hoe verskriklik dit was om na die muur te kyk, word sy deur een stukkie waarheid gedra.

Jake lewe.

Hy moet. Kaptein Hisel het hom onder die brandweerwa gekry en hom dadelik herken. Sonder twyfel, en dit was voordat hulle Jake se gesig verbind het. Dis duidelik dat die man Jake moet wees – sy hare en liggaamsbou en oë, sy houding. Andersins sou die kaptein hom nie geken het nie.

En dan is daar die ander brokkie onweerlegbare inligting – die feit dat Jake vir Sierra ken, haar gesig sowel as haar naam.

Jamie konsentreer op die mense wat om haar rondmaal. Niks aan Manhattan lyk soos voor die terroriste-aanval nie. Van die as en rook hang steeds in die lug, en mense staan in groepies langs die muur en sypaadjies. Baie van hulle huil.

Jamie kyk na hulle totdat sy dit nie meer kan verduur nie. Sy laat sak haar gesig in haar hande en maak haar oë toe terwyl sy rukkerig asemhaal. Was dit waansinnig van haar om al die pad hiernatoe te kom om na 'n muur vol foto's van vermiste mense te kyk? Die man in die hospitaalbed is Jake. Al die bewyse is daar. En die verpleegster het die situasie rondom die bloedgroep verduidelik. Alles maak sin.

Sy kyk op en kyk deur die openinge tussen haar vingers. 'n Vrou van ongeveer haar ouderdom staan naby een van die strooibiljette. Haar kop hang en gedempte snikke ruk deur haar lyf. Een van haar hande is diep in haar jassak gestee. Maar die ander het sy op die gesig van die persoon op die foto geplaas, asof dit sal maak dat sy op 'n manier met haar geliefde herenig sal word.

Jamie wil na die vrou toe gaan, haar arm om haar sit en haar troos, haar belooft dat alles sal regkom. Maar dit sal nie – nie vir enige van die mense wat voor die strooibiljette van vermiste mense staan of hulle foto's teen die muur plak nie. Jamie trek haar asem in en die lug is skerp in haar neusholtes. Sy staan op, draai haar rug na die huilende vreemdeling en wuif vir 'n taxi.

Daar is niks wat sy vir die vrou kan sê om haar te troos nie. Dit maak in elk geval nie saak hoe Jamie se hart na haar toe uitgaan nie, hulle het niks in gemeen nie. Jamie is een van die gelukkiges, en alhoewel sy en Jake baie verloor het, is dit nie permanent nie. Nee, sy moenie langer in hierdie see van hartseer swem en teen die doodsgety skop nie. Nie terwyl haar man 'n paar kilometer daarvandaan lewendig in 'n hospitaalkamer lê nie.

Dis tyd om terug te gaan en alles in die stryd te werp om Jake Bryan nie net te leer om sy lewe met haar te deel nie.

Maar om haar lief te hê.

By die huis daardie aand, toe Jim en Sierra slaap, trek Jamie haar sweetpak en

T-hemp aan en klim in die bed. En daar begin sy met 'n vreemde soort repetisie. Sy probeer haar indink hoe die komende week gaan verloop wanneer Jake huis toe kom. Hoe gaan sy hom help onthou wie hy is, hom terugneem na die plek waar sy lag en glimlag maklik kom, na waar dit doodnatuurlik is om saam met Sierra perdjie te speel?

Toe dink sy vir die eerste keer aan iets wat sedert Jake se ongeluk nog nie by haar opgekom het nie. Jamie leun oor, skakel die bedliggie aan en sit regop. Vandat sy kan onthou, het Jake nog altyd soggens vroeg Bybel geles en aantekeninge in sy dagboek gemaak.

'n Keer of wat was Jamie in die versoeking om te loer, nuuskierig om presies te sien wat in haar man se gedagtes aangaan. Maar Jamie se gewete het haar nooit toegelaat om op Jake se privaatheid inbreuk te maak nie, en dit het altyd by 'n vlietende gedagte gebly, 'n eenvoudige, weerstrewige idee waarvan sy vinnig ontslae geraak het.

Maar nou ... nou het alles verander.

As sy Jake wil leer om weer homself te wees, gaan sy alle beskikbare hulp nodig hê. En sy kan nie aan iets beters dink as om toegang tot sy diepste gedagtes te hê nie, tot die woorde wat die herstel van Jake se geheue kan versnel.

Sy klim uit die bed en draf ligvoets om na Jake se kant. Sy buk en haal twee boeke onder die bed uit, boeke wat Jake Dinsdagoggend voordat hy werk toe is, daar ingeskuif het.

Die een het 'n swart leeromslag met Jake se naam wat in die regter- onderste hoek in goud aangebring is. Dis die Bybel wat sy pa op Jake se eerste dag by die brandweer vir hom gegee het. Van die letters het afgekom en al wat Jamie duidelik kan sien, is die hoofletters J en B.

*Hoe gepas, dink sy. Dis wat die ouens by die stasie hom noem. JB. Sy maak die voorblad oop en lees die inskrywing op die reeds deurskynend dun papier: Aan Jake ... Maak nie saak wat gebeur nie, die woorde in hierdie boek sal jou bewaar. Al my liefde, Pa.*

Weet Jim Bryan dat Jake steeds hierdie ou boek het, dat hy steeds elke oggend voor werk daaruit lees? Hoekom het sy nog nooit tevore belanggestel nie? Hoekom wou sy nooit daarna kyk of die inskrywing voorin lees nie? Dis een ding om nie in sy dagboek te kyk nie ... maar sy Bybel? Dit sou onskadelik gewees het, buiten vir een haakplek.

Sy wou nooit iets daarmee te doen hê nie.

Haar oë val weer op Jim Bryan se woorde en sy weet waarom sy nooit daaraan wou raak nie. Want hoe mooi dit ook al klink, is daar geen waarheid in die boodskap wat Jake se pa geskryf het nie. Die woorde in die Bybel sal nie 'n brandweerman of enigiemand bewaar nie. Dit is op die ou einde net woorde, maak nie saak hoe mooi dit klink nie. Larry het in God geglo, dan nie? En wat het die Bybel hom gebaat? Vandag lê hy iewers onder die puin van 'n honderdverdiepingebou.

Bewaar se moses.

'n Sug ontsnap oor Jamie se lippe terwyl sy deur die boek blaai, die bladsye dun en verslete. In die tweede deel van die boek het Jake 'n paar gedeeltes onderstreep of met 'n geel neonpen gemerk. Daar is ook 'n paar aantekeninge in die kantlyne aangebring en terwyl sy blaai, vang een van die bladsye haar oog. Sy hou die Bybel nader aan haar gesig om beter te kan sien.

Die opskrif boaan die bladsy lees “Matteus.”

Jamie voel onbeholpe en onkundig met die boek oop voor haar. Buiten die keer toe sy die jeugkamp saam met Jake bygewoon het, het sy nog nooit 'n Bybel oopgemaak of die moeite gedoen om die name van die verskillende boeke of wat hulle verteenwoordig, te leer ken nie. Noudat sy na Jake se aantekeninge en neongemerkte gedeeltes kyk, verwyd sy haarself daarvoor. Dis duidelik dat hierdie gedeeltes tot haar man se hart gespreek het. Kon sy nie maar die geringste teken van belangstelling getoon het nie?

Sy vernou haar oë en lees die vers. Dit kom uit die elfde hoofstuk.

*“Kom na My toe, almal wat uitgeput en oorlaai is, en Ek sal julle rus gee. Neem my juk op julle en leer van My, want Ek is sagmoedig en nederig van hart, en julle sal rus kry vir julle gemoed.”*

Daar is 'n vreemde roering in Jamie se hart, 'n flou maar ongekende soort vrede, 'n vrede wat sy nog nooit tevore ervaar het nie. Vir 'n oomblik wens Jamie amper dat die woorde waar is. So waar soos Jake glo dit is. Dis eintlik vreemd. Want Jamie het nog altyd geglo die Bybel is net 'n klomp mooi briewe oor 'n goeie man. Sommige besonderhede geskiedkundig korrek, sommige nie. Maar dis al.

Haar oë beweeg oor die vorige verse totdat sy sien dat dit Jesus is wat in hierdie gedeelte praat. Alles aan die woorde klink warm en wonderlik – veral die gedeelte oor rus vir haar siel. Maar dis nie wat Jake onderstreep het nie. Die gedeelte wat hom oënskynlik die diepste getref het, is hierdie drie woorde:

*Leer van My ...*

En in die kantlyn langs die vers het Jake geskryf:

*My doel: leer alles wat ek kan van Jesus ...*

Is dit hierdie woorde wat Jake deur al die jare gemotiveer het? Hy het geen geheime vir haar gehad nie. Soms nadat hulle intiem was, in die stil oomblikke voordat hulle aan die slaap raak, het sy in sy oor gefluister.

“Ek is die heel gelukkigste vrou op aarde, Jake. Weet jy dit?”

Dan sou hy haar stywer teen hom vashou en was dit asof sy glimlag haar binnekant verlig. “Die Here het ons bymekaargebring. Al wat ek wil hê, is om 'n man te wees wat Hom trots maak. Ek wil elke dag 'n bietjie meer soos Jesus wees.”

Jamie sit regop op die kant van die bed. Dis ook wat hy elke keer gesê het wanneer sy hom as pa gekomplimenteer het. “Solank ek soos Jesus kan wees, is ek oukei.”

Nou raak alles duidelik op 'n manier wat Jamie hoendervleis gee. Jake het dit

sy lewenstaak gemaak om 'n studie van Jesus Christus te maak, en in die proses – selfs al deel Jamie nie in haar man se oortuigings nie – het Jake sommige van Jesus se eienskappe en manier van lewe aangeneem. En nou ... nou dat hy vergeet het wie hy was, kan sy aan niks beter as hierdie Bybelgedeeltes dink om hom weer by homself uit te bring nie. As sy hom net sover kan kry om die gemerkte gedeeltes in sy Bybel te lees – dit te memoriseer, te laat insink en weer na die aantekeninge in die kantlyne te gaan kyk. Die inligting binne die leeromslag van sy Bybel kan in werklikheid as 'n soort padkaart dien om hom te help onthou wie hy was en hoe om weer daardie persoon te word.

Versigtig, asof die boek nou meer werd is, maak Jamie die Bybel toe voordat sy Jake se dagboek optel. Haar gewete wil-wil weer begin knaag, maar hierdie keer laat sy haar nie daardeur stuit nie. Die bladsye bevat immers Jake se diepste gewaarwordinge, die gedagtes en gevoelens wat in sy hart omgaan. Tesame met die inligting in die Bybel is daar niks meer wat Jamie kan doen of sê om Jake te help onthou wie hy was nie.

Sy blaai deur dosyne inskrywings tot by die een wat hy Dinsdagoggend voor die terroriste-aanval gemaak het. Die voorafgaande inskrywings het oor die algemeen uit 'n soliede blok woorde bestaan. Maar die laaste een is 'n brief.

'n Brief wat hy aan haar gerig het.

Die trane brand in Jamie se oë en maak dit wasig voor haar. Sy knip haar oë 'n paar maal en toe sy weer mooi kan sien, begin sy lees.

*Liefste Jamie*

*Diep in my hart is daar 'n gevoel dat daar 'n verandering gaan kom vir my en jou. Dalk is dit jou vrae oor die kerk of dié dat jy deesdae langer met Sierra oor haar Bybelstories gesels. Hoe dit ook al sy, ek bid dat die Here jou hart sal aanraak, my lief. Hy beteken alles vir my, en ek weet dat Hy eendag ook alles vir jou sal beteken. Op daardie dag sal jy nie meer hoef bang te wees nie, want jy sal op God die Almagtige kan steun. Ek wil hê jy moet weet, my skat, dat wanneer jy daardie kosbare geloof aanneem, ek breër sal glimlag as wat jy my al ooit sien glimlag het. Want dit wat ek selfs meer as jou liefde wil hê, is die wete dat ons tot in ewigheid bymekaar sal wees.*

*Ek kan my nie die ewigheid sonder jou indink nie. Ek is te lief vir jou om jou te verloor.*

Jake het verder geskryf, maar Jamie se trane maak dit onmoontlik vir haar om te lees. Sy maak die dagboek toe en sit dit saam met Jake se Bybel onder die bed waar hy dit laas gelos het.

Dierbare, wonderlike Jake. Hy dink altyd aan haar.

Hy het sy geloof altyd vir homself gehou, daarteen gewaak om aan haar te karring of vir haar te preek. Maar hier ... hier is sy hart. Nie dat sy die een of ander uiterlike vorm van geloof aanneem om hom tevrede te stel nie. Maar dat sy glo – sodat hulle, volgens sy begrip van die lewe en die dood en die

ewigheid, nooit ooit van mekaar geskei sal wees nie. Op sy eie manier het sy liefde vir haar so diep gelê. Vir God, Sierra en vir haar. Hulle is sy lewe, en saam is hulle die kern van wie hy is. Noudat Jamie hierdie woorde gelees het, verstaan sy dit beter as ooit tevore.

Nou sal sy hom eenvoudig moet help om dit ook te verstaan.

# Chapter TWENTY-TWO

SEPTEMBER 18, 2001

The trip was Clay's idea.

A week after the terrorist attacks, Laura had nearly given up all hope. Yes, firefighters and police officers in New York City were still calling their efforts at Ground Zero a rescue, still desperately lifting one bulldozer scoop of debris after another off the pile of rubble that had once been the World Trade Center in hopes of finding someone buried alive.

But Laura couldn't believe there were many people who actually believed that would happen. How could anyone still be living in the smoldering heap of tons of cement and steel? Still, the rescue continued, and somehow Laura and thousands of others like her were supposed to stay close to the phone, praying for a miracle.

Something had snapped inside Laura after that Thursday night, the evening when Eric would've come home if he were still alive. Her conversation with Clay had been both painful and eye-opening. Since then there had been fewer moments when she would catch herself wondering about Eric and how his business trip was going, or when she would find herself looking out the window calculating his time of return. She still held out hope, but the reality of what she feared most was setting in. And with it a hole in her heart the size of the Grand Canyon. Somehow the details of their sorry marriage and the current state of their relationship were not in the forefront of her mind. Instead, her memories were of the two of them back in their early married days, back when they used to sit in the backyard near their garage apartment and sing together. Fond memories of the days when she was pregnant with their daughter, back when Eric would cuddle up against her and play songs he'd written on the guitar.

"So my baby will know my voice." He'd grin and gently place his hand on her abdomen.

Laura could still feel his fingers pressing against her.

Another memory haunted her that week. The memory of Eric's panicked voice, his stricken face when the doctor told them that their little girl was stillborn. A chaplain had found them in the delivery room an hour later and offered to pray with them.

"No." Eric's answer had been quick, and he tightened the grip he had on her hand. "We need time."

A month later the pastor at Westlake Community Church had held a baby dedication, and he invited Laura and Eric. "We all feel your loss," he told them. "This way your friends here can pray with you about what happened."

But Eric wouldn't consider it. "I'm not going." His eyes had flashed with an anger that had never been there before. "Besides, it's a little late for prayer." The fire in his expression faded quickly, but Eric's determination to stay away from church never did.

They rarely talked about the loss of their daughter, and to her great disappointment, they never named her. But years later, at a counseling session, Eric said something that would stay with Laura forever. The counselor had asked Eric to talk about his greatest disappointment in life.

His answer was quick and pointed. "I never knew my little girl."

Laura couldn't remember her answer that day, but she knew what it would be now.

That Eric had never known his little boy, either.

The memories were all that kept Laura from losing her mind as the days dragged on. Since Thursday, Clay had been there constantly. He played catch with Josh and helped him with his math homework; he made pasta or ordered pizza at dinnertime. He listened anytime Laura wanted to talk. Last night he'd brought her a glass of water and sat at the opposite end of the sofa. For a long while he'd said nothing.

Then he turned his body so he could see her better. "You still think there's a chance, don't you?"



Laura squirmed and fought off the wetness that gathered in her eyes. “Sometimes.” She took a sip of water before finishing her thought. “Not that he’s alive in the rubble. But ... somewhere maybe. Walking around in a daze, disoriented. Lying in a hospital bed.” She blinked back the tiresome tears. “That’s possible, don’t you think?”

“Sure.” Clay had let silence fill in the gaps of their conversation. Laura understood. What could he say? If Eric was wandering the streets of New York City or somehow holed up somewhere unconscious, how would they ever know?

It wasn’t until that morning—a week after the attacks—that Clay arrived with an idea. He waited until Josh was off to school, then he poured coffee for the two of them and sat across from Laura at the dining room table. After a long moment, he met her eyes and said simply, “We need to go to New York.”

Laura stared at him, and almost in slow motion, she set her coffee cup back on the table. “Why?”

“To look for him.”

A pit formed in her stomach. She stood and made her way to the window. Their backyard was one of her favorite places. The manicured grass and sparkling pool always relaxed her. But nothing could relax her now, not in light of Clay’s statement. “We’ve called the hospitals every day.” She glanced at Clay over her shoulder. “He isn’t there.”

“No ... but he could be somewhere else. Maybe at someone’s house or at a homeless shelter. Something.”

Clay folded his hands on the table, and Laura gazed back out the window. She heard Clay’s chair slide across the floor and felt him come up alongside her a few minutes later.

“I hate seeing you like this, Laura.” His right shoulder barely brushed against her left one, and his voice was a whisper. “Not knowing whether you should grieve Eric’s death or wait for him to come home.”

Laura let her chin fall to her chest. The sorrow was back, a sorrow

that blocked her throat and made speaking impossible.

“We have to go.”

From the corner of her eye Laura saw him clench his teeth. When he spoke again, his voice was thick. “He’s my brother, Laura.”

Laura kept her gaze straight ahead, seeing visions of Josh and his friends playing in the pool. No matter how hard she tried, she couldn’t picture one poolside memory that included Eric. He didn’t swim with Josh or his friends or even with her. He never had. She thought about what Clay had said. It was something they could’ve talked about in counseling, if only they could somehow find him. “What ...” She turned and faced him. “What would we do once we got there?”

He raised his left arm and leaned it against the window. “Make flyers and post them near the hospital—same thing everyone else is doing.”

Laura felt a hundred years old. She was dying to believe something good might come from Clay’s plan, but the idea seemed virtually hopeless. She crossed her arms and leaned against her husband’s brother, letting her head fall on his shoulder. She pictured herself boarding a plane with Clay, flying to New York City, and posting flyers of Eric on empty walls and park benches. What would it prove? She turned and leaned her back against the window so she was facing Clay. “Then what?”

Clay studied her, and a layer of tears sprang up across his eyes. “We check the missions, the homeless shelters. Talk to police and fire officials, show his picture to everyone. Then we come home and wait.”

The longer they talked about the idea, the more sense it made to her. Nothing good could come from sitting at home in Los Angeles wondering about Eric. If he was—by some strange miracle—still alive, there was only one way to find out, and that was to follow Clay’s plan and go to New York City.

Clay still had vacation time, and by two that afternoon, Laura had booked them a flight out for the next morning. Someone at church had been more than willing to take care of Josh, and that night she explained the trip

to her son.

“Uncle Clay and I are going to go to New York for a few days.”

Josh was lying in bed, his face pale against his dark hair. “To find Daddy?”

“To try.” Laura soothed the boy's bangs off his forehead. “If he's hurt or sick, he might not know who he is. The only way to find out is to look for him.”

For a long while Josh lay there, unmoving, his eyes dry. Then he reached up and placed his fingers over hers. “Mom ... can I ask you something?”

“Of course, honey.” Being alone like this with Josh made Laura realize how different life had been since the terrorist attacks. Normally, she and Josh spent lots of time together, reading or talking about his day. Sometimes playing Scrabble or crazy eights. But in the past week they'd barely spoken.

Josh winced. “Promise you won't be mad?”

“Mad? Honey, nothing you could ask would make me angry with you. Just say it ... whatever's on your heart, I want to know.”

“If Daddy's not in New York City somewhere, that means he's dead, right?”

The question was so blunt it nearly took Laura's breath away. But now—a week after the collapse of the World Trade Center—the idea that Eric might be dead was less shocking than it had been at first. Laura swallowed and kept her eyes on Josh's. “Yes. That's right, honey. If he isn't in New York somewhere, he's probably dead.”

“Okay, then ...” The child drew in an exaggerated breath and sat up, meeting her gaze straight on. He was more nervous than Laura had ever seen him. He worked his mouth for a moment, swallowing until he found his voice. “If you don't find him, can Uncle Clay be my dad?”

Her son's words hit her full force and knocked her into a riptide of pain until she thought she would drown from the lack of air. Finally,

slowly, a stream of oxygen found its way in through her nostrils, and she put her arms around Josh and held him close. How had Eric not seen what his long hours at work were doing to their son? The boy neither knew nor loved his father. In fact, Eric hadn't lost just a daughter when their baby died all those years ago.

He'd lost a son too.

She didn't want to cry, didn't want the boy to think he'd done something wrong by voicing his heart. But she couldn't speak, either.

"Mom?" Josh's voice was muffled against her shoulder, and he pulled back, searching her eyes. "Are you mad at me?"

"No, son. It ... it was a fair question." In the hidden places of Laura's soul, she was still gasping for breath. It was all she could do to appear normal for Josh.

"So ..." The child angled his head and picked at a ball of fuzz on his bedspread. "Can he?"

"Well ..."  
*God, calm me down ... give me the words.* "Uncle Clay will always be your uncle, Josh ... not your father. That's how God made it."

"Oh." Her son's face fell, and his chin dropped closer to his pajama top. "Okay." His head stayed down, but his eyes lifted just enough to see her. "Can I pretend he's my dad, then? I mean, if you don't find Daddy in New York?"

What could she say? She clasped Josh's hands in hers and nodded. "Uncle Clay loves you very much, buddy. You can pretend whatever you'd like."

"God won't be mad at me?"

"No. Not at all."

"And you, either?"

Her heart was breaking, but she managed a smile. She leaned forward and kissed Josh on his nose, hugging him once more before drawing back. "The fact that you love your uncle will never make me mad, honey. Even if

you pretend he's your dad.”

Clay picked Laura up at her house the next morning and drove the two of them to the Burbank Airport. He'd stayed up late the night before and used a photo of Eric from the previous summer to make a flyer. The picture showed Eric standing behind a podium at a business dinner. Eric had given a speech that night, and someone from Koppel and Grant had snapped the picture. Eric had found it in his box at work a few weeks later and brought it home.

The flyer was simple, Eric's name and description, the fact that he'd been working on the sixty-fourth floor of the south tower at the time of the attacks, and three phone numbers for people to call if they knew anything of his whereabouts. Laura had a hundred copies in her carry-on bag.

Air travel had resumed in limited amounts, and the two of them had to pass through additional security stations before boarding the plane, but still they were early. They stored their bags in the overhead compartments and took their seats, Clay against the window and Laura on the aisle.

“I'm glad we're going.” Laura adjusted her seat belt and glanced out the window. “I'd always wonder otherwise.”

“Yeah.” Clay couldn't bring himself to smile. “Me too.”

They fell silent, and Clay turned to the window. Were they really on their way to New York? To look for Eric? A week had passed, and the idea that Eric was gone was no more real today than it had been when the attacks first happened. It wasn't just for Laura that he was going to Manhattan. It was for himself. Whenever Clay needed to talk, all he had to do was find Eric. Because as far back as he could remember, he and Eric had been honest with each other.

Until the problems in Eric's marriage had started.

By going to New York, there was a chance that just maybe he might find his big brother once more. And then he could look in his eyes and ask him why? Why hadn't he said anything about his troubles at home, and how could he have put his work ahead of Laura and Josh for all those

years? Laura, who had wanted only to love him. Maybe if he found Eric the two of them could talk about everything Eric hadn't said and done, and maybe ... just maybe everything would go back to how it was before.

For all of them.

Clay sat back in his seat and willed his nerves to settle down. He was a police officer who'd faced volatile situations with armed drug dealers or crazed gang members. But as the plane began to taxi down the runway, the fear that sliced through him was unlike anything he'd ever experienced. Not because he was afraid to fly. But because he was afraid of what they would find when they touched down in New York City. Afraid that Eric wouldn't be at a homeless shelter or lying in some makeshift evacuation center near Ground Zero. But that he'd be buried in the midst of it.

Clay blinked and exhaled slowly. *Calm ... be calm for Laura.* The baggage handlers were heaving luggage into the belly of the plane, and Clay closed his eyes and thought about the magnet on his refrigerator door. *Lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight.* The Scripture trickled across his soul like a stream in the desert, and Clay's heart breathed with gratefulness. The Lord hadn't abandoned him, despite his fears.

"Clay?" Laura touched his hand, and he twisted in his seat so he could see her. "Are you okay?"

"Sorry. I ..."

He gripped his knees and met her gaze. "I was thinking."

"Let's pray, okay?" Her eyes were liquid green, filled with a kind of hope and anticipation that were illogical and maybe even downright crazy.

Still, there was a chance.

One they definitely wouldn't find without God's help. He took her hand and bowed his head near hers. "Lord, give us safety as we travel, safety and peace. Calm the fears in both our hearts and guide us every step of the way in New York City." He paused just as the plane lifted off. "And please, help us find my brother."

The next few days passed in a blur of taping posters to various walls and talking with officials at hospitals and homeless shelters. By Monday morning Laura was exhausted and ready to go home. The sights and sounds of a crippled Manhattan were more than she could bear. She and Clay had taken adjoining rooms at the Marriott, but at night when they returned from a day of walking the streets of the city, Clay would spread out on the bed adjacent to Laura's and let her talk. For the most part their conversations involved strategy. Where to put the posters, who to talk to, where else to check. In the end, no matter how much they planned, the results had been the same each day.

"I'm sorry, we haven't seen him."

"No, he isn't here—every one of our patients is accounted for."

"Nope, he's not familiar."

At one point they'd even walked the halls of Mount Sinai Medical Center in the hopes of finding Eric lying somewhere, forgotten and unidentified. But every patient had a name, and at least one visitor. None were waiting for a family member to show up and identify them.

Now—with the weekend behind them, Laura had convinced Clay they needed to get as close to Ground Zero as possible. They were allowed past a few checkpoints, simply because they flashed a copy of their flyer and asked for permission to post it closer to the rubble pile.

They were a block away from the collapsed towers when a police officer stopped them, came up to the back of the cab, and moved his hand in a turning motion. "No one's allowed past this point ... only official personnel in this area, you'll have to turn around."

Laura rolled down the window and felt her heart skip a beat. "My husband was in the south tower." Laura peered at the officer from the back of the cab and showed him the flyer with Eric's picture. "We're here from Los Angeles. Please ... can we get a little closer?"

"No one goes past this point." The man anchored his hands on his

hips and looked at Laura. His eyes were a dark, haunting reflection of all he must've seen since September 11. "No one but official personnel."

Clay leaned over Laura's legs and looked at the man. "I'm a police officer from Los Angeles." He pointed to the flyer. "The missing guy's my brother. Are you sure we can't get closer?"

The officer's face softened some, but he shook his head. "Look ... it's been nearly two weeks since those buildings fell." He pointed down the street to a line of dump trucks slowly heading up a hill of debris. Loud machinery sounded in the background, and the officer's voice could barely be heard over the noise. "If your brother's in there, believe me—you don't want to find him."

"We won't stay." Clay was persistent. "If we could post a few flyers, at least we'd feel like we did our best."

For a moment the officer only looked at them, his eyes moving from Clay to Laura, and back to Clay again. His mouth hung open just enough to show his astonishment. "Can I be straight with you?"

"Definitely." Clay's answer was quick.

For a split moment Laura considered covering her ears. She didn't want straight talk this close to Ground Zero; she wanted Eric.

"I don't care what they're calling this in the newspapers, but it's not a rescue effort." He pressed his lips together, and though his eyes stayed dry, his chin quivered some. "What's going on in there is a recovery. And they'll be darn lucky if they recover even a few hundred bodies." He shook his head. "It's that bad."

The cab driver shot them a look over his shoulder. "Meter's running."

Laura ignored the driver and locked eyes with the officer. "So we're wasting our time?" Clay was still stretched out over her knees, peering out the window. "Is that what you mean?"

"Yes." He sniffed hard and stared in the direction of Ground Zero. "Everyone wants to believe that their person is missing, but I'll tell you something, lady. There just aren't any missing persons. The patients at



every hospital have been identified, and the homeless shelters have no victims.” He tossed his hands in the air and met her eyes once more. “It’s too late for any of that. Your husband ain’t missing, lady. He’s dead. Go back to LA and have a service for him. Then find a way like the rest of us to get on with life.” The officer glanced at Clay and back at her. “I’m sorry.”

He stepped away, turned around, and yelled something to an officer across the street. Then he walked beyond Laura and Clay and headed for the driver of the cab behind them. “No one’s allowed past this point,” he yelled. “Only official personnel beyond this ...”

Clay sat up and stared straight ahead. Then he dug his elbows into his knees and rested his head in his hands. Laura watched him, and something inside her began to die, something she couldn’t quite peg. Through every day, every hour, since September 11, Clay had been strong for her, positive, encouraging. Even when they’d considered the worst possible scenario—that Eric might never come home—he’d been cautiously optimistic.

But not now.

Laura closed her eyes for a moment and remembered the officer’s words. *Your husband ain’t missing, lady. He’s dead ...*

If it was true, she couldn’t break down here, not parked in lower Manhattan with an anxious cab driver casting glances at her from the front seat. She sucked in a quick breath and put her hand on Clay’s knee. “Clay ...”

After a few seconds he looked at her. His watery eyes told her they were thinking the same thing. It was over ... the search, the second chance, the hope that Eric would ever come home. All of it was over. She leaned forward and tapped the driver on the shoulder. “To the Marriott, please.”

Their efforts in New York City were finished. The police officer’s blunt words had told them all they needed to know. It was time to go home, have a service for Eric, and get on with living.

## **Twee-en-twintig**

18 September 2001

Die besoek aan New York was Clay se idee.

'n Week ná die terroriste-aanvalle het Laura byna alle hoop laat vaar. Ja, die brandweermanne en reddingswerkers se arbeid by Ground Zero word steeds reddingswerk genoem, en hulle is steeds besig om een na die ander stootskrapervrag puin weg te ry in die hoop om iemand te kry wat lewend onder die reste van die World Trade Center begrawe is.

Maar Laura dink nie daar's baie mense wat glo dit is moontlik nie. Hoe kan enigiemand steeds in die smeulende hoop van tonne sement en staal lewe? Nietemin word daar voortgegaan met die reddingspoging en is Laura en duisende ander mense soos sy veronderstel om naby die telefoon te bly en vir 'n wonderwerk te bid.

Ná die Donderdagaand toe Eric aanvanklik sou huis toe kom, het daar iets in Laura geknak. Haar gesprek met Clay was beide pynlik en bevrydend. Sedertdien betrap sy haarself al hoe minder dat sy oor Eric en sy sakebesoek tob, of dat sy deur die venster kyk en probeer uitwerk wanneer hy gaan terugkom. Sy het nog nie alle hoop laat vaar nie, maar die realiteit van haar grootste vrees is besig om tot haar deur te dring. En daarmee saam 'n gapende leemte in haar hart. Om die een of ander rede is besonderhede van hulle ongelukkige huwelik en die huidige toestand van hulle verhouding nie so voorop in haar gedagtes nie. Sy bly dink aan hulle lewe as jonggetroudes toe hulle saans in die agterplaas voor hulle garage-woonstel gesit en sing het. Mooi herinneringe aan die dae toe sy hulle dogtertjie verwag het, toe Eric langs haar kom sit het en die liedjies wat hy self geskryf het, op sy kitaar gespeel het.

"Sodat ons kleinding my stem ken." Hy sou 'n laggie gee en sy hand liggies op haar maag sit.

Laura kan nou nog die drukking van sy vingers teen haar voel.

Daar is nog 'n herinnering wat die week by haar spook. Die herinnering van Eric se paniekerige stem, sy geskokte gesig toe die dokter vir hulle sê dat hulle klein dogtertjie doodgebore is. 'n Predikant het hulle 'n uur later in die kraamkamer aangetref en aangebied om saam met hulle te bid.

"Nee," het Eric vinnig geantwoord en haar hand stywer vasgehou. "Ons het tyd nodig."

'n Maand later het die leraar by die Westlake Community Church 'n inseeñingsdiens gehou en hy het Laura en Eric genooi. "Ons deel in julle hartseer," het hy vir hulle gesê. "En wil graag saam met julle bid oor wat gebeur het."

Maar Eric het dit nie eens oorweeg nie. "Ek sal nie daar wees nie." Daar was

'n woede in sy oë wat Laura nog nie daar gesien het nie. “Dis in elk geval ’n bietjie laat vir gebed.” Die vuur in sy oë het vinnig doodgegaan, maar Eric se vasberadenheid om nie kerk toe te gaan nie, het gebly.

Hulle het selde oor die verlies van hulle dogtertjie gepraat, en tot Laura se groot teleurstelling het hulle haar nooit ’n naam gegee nie. Maar jare later het Eric tydens ’n beradingsessie iets gesê wat Laura vir altyd sal bybly. Die berader het Eric gevra om oor die grootste teleurstelling van sy lewe te praat.

Hy het vinnig en nadruklik geantwoord. “Ek het my dogtertjie nooit geken nie.”

Laura kan nie onthou wat haar antwoord daardie dag was nie, maar sy weet wat dit nou sal wees.

Dat Eric ook nie sy seuntjie geken het nie.

Dis net haar herinneringe wat keer dat sy van haar verstand af raak. Sedert Donderdag is Clay die hele tyd by hulle. Hy speel buite met Josh en help hom met sy huiswerk; hy maak pasta of kry pizza vir aandete. Hy luister enige tyd wanneer Laura wil praat. Gisteraand het hy vir haar ’n glas water gebring en op die ander punt van die bank gaan sit. Vir ’n hele ruk het hy niks gesê nie.

Toe het hy skuins gedraai en reguit na haar gekyk. “Jy dink nog steeds daar is ’n kans, nè?”

Laura het teen die nattigheid in haar oë baklei. “Partykeer.” Sy het ’n slukkie water geneem voordat sy verder gepraat het. “Nie dat hulle hom lewendig uit die puin gaan haal nie. Maar dat hy dalk gedisoriënteerd is en iewers in ’n dwaal rondloop. Of in ’n hospitaalbed lê.” Sy knip haar oë om haar trane te keer. “Dis seker moontlik, nè?”

“Ja.” Clay het die stilte tussen hulle woorde laat lê. Laura het verstaan. Wat moes hy sê? As Eric in New York se strate rondwaal of bewusteloos iewers lê, hoe sal hulle ooit weet?

Dit was eers vanoggend – ’n week ná die aanvalle – dat Clay met die idee vorendag gekom het. Hy het gewag totdat Josh skool toe is, toe het hy vir hulle koffie gemaak en oorkant Laura by die eetkamertafel kom sit. Na ’n lang oomblik het hy haar oë ontmoet en eenvoudig gesê: “Ons moet New York toe gaan.”

Laura het hom aangestaar en haar koffiebeker amper in vertraagde aksie op die tafel neergesit. “Hoekom?”

“Om na hom te gaan soek.”

Daar was skielik ’n knop op haar maag. Sy het opgestaan en na die venster geloop. Hulle agterplaas is een van haar gunstelingplekke. Die versorgde grasperk en vonkelende swembadwater het haar nog altyd laat ontspan. Maar daar is niks wat haar nou kan laat ontspan nie, nie ná wat Clay gesê het nie. “Ons het die hospitale elke dag gebel.” Sy het oor haar skouer na hom gekyk. “Hy is nie daar nie.”

“Nee ... maar hy kan iewers anders wees. Dalk by iemand se huis of by ’n sentrum vir haweloses. Êrens.”

Clay het sy hande op die tafel gevou en Laura het weer deur die venster

gekyk. Sy het gehoor hoe Clay se stoel oor die vloer skraap en 'n paar minute later gevoel hoe hy langs haar kom staan.

“Ek haat dit om jou so te sien, Laura.” Sy regterskouer het net-net aan haar linkerskouer geraak en hy het in 'n fluisterstem gepraat. “Jy weet nie of jy oor Eric se dood moet treur en of jy vir hom moet wag om huis toe te kom nie.”

Laura het haar kop laat hang. Die hartseer was terug, 'n hartseer wat in haar keel kom sit het en dit onmoontlik gemaak het om te praat.

“Ons moet gaan.”

Uit die hoek van haar oog kon Laura sien hoe sy kakebeen beweeg. Toe hy weer praat, was sy stem vol ongestorte trane. “Hy is my broer, Laura.”

Laura het reguit voor haar gekyk en in haar gedagtes het sy Josh en sy vriende in die swembad sien speel. Maak nie saak hoe hard sy probeer nie, sy kan nie aan een swembad-kuier dink wat Eric insluit nie. Hy het nie saam met Josh of sy vriende of selfs saam met haar geswem nie. Nooit nie. Sy het weer gedink aan wat Clay gesê het. Dit was iets waaroor hulle tydens berading kon praat, as hulle hom maar net op 'n manier kan opspoor. “Wat ... ” Sy het na hom toe gedraai. “Wat gaan ons doen as ons daar kom?”

Hy het met sy linkerarm teen die venster geleun. “Strooibiljette maak en naby die hospitaal opsit – nes al die ander mense.”

Laura het honderd jaar oud gevoel. Sy het gewens sy kon glo dat daar iets goeds uit Clay se plan sou kom, maar dit het na 'n hopelose idee geklink. Sy het haar arms gevou en teen haar man se broer geleun, haar kop teen sy skouer laat val. Sy het gesien hoe sy op 'n vliegtuig klim, New York toe vlieg en foto's van Eric teen leë mure en op bankies plak. Wat sou dit bewys? Toe het sy omgedraai en met haar rug teen die venster geleun sodat sy na Clay kon kyk. “Wat dan?”

Clay het 'n paar oomblik na haar gekyk en sy oë het vol trane geword. “Ons gaan soek by reddingsmissies en sentrums vir haweloses. Praat met die polisie en brandweer, wys sy foto vir almal. Dan kom ons huis toe en wag.”

Hoe langer hulle oor die idee gepraat het, hoe meer sin het dit vir haar gemaak. Dit het hulle nie gebaat om in Los Angeles by die huis te sit en te raai wat van Eric geword het nie. As hy op 'n wonderbaarlike manier nog gelewe het, was daar net een manier om uit te vind, en dit was om te doen wat Clay voorgestel het en New York toe te gaan.

Clay het nog verlof en teen tweeuur die middag het Laura hulle vliegkaartjies vir die volgende oggend bespreek. Een van haar vriendinne van die kerk is meer as bereid om na Josh te kyk, en daardie aand verduidelik sy die besoek aan haar seun.

“Ek en oom Clay gaan vir 'n paar dae New York toe.”

Josh lê in sy bed, sy gesiggie bleek teen sy donker hare. “Om Pappa te gaan haal?”

“Ons gaan probeer.” Laura streel sy kuif uit sy gesig. “As hy seergekry het of siek is, weet hy dalk nie wie hy is nie. Die enigste manier om uit te vind, is om na hom te gaan soek.”

Vir 'n ruk lê Josh doodstil na haar en kyk. Toe steek hy sy handjie uit en sy neem dit in hare. “Mamma ... kan ek Mamma iets vra?”

“Natuurlik, my skat.” Om nou so by Josh te wees laat Laura besef hoe hulle lewe sedert die aanval verander het. Normaalweg bestee sy en Josh baie tyd saam. Hulle lees of gesels oor sy dag en soms speel hulle Scrabble of kaart. Maar die afgelope week het hulle skaars gepraat.

Josh krimp ineen. “Belowe Mamma gaan nie kwaad wees nie?”

“Kwaad? Liefie, niks wat jy vra, sal my kwaad maak nie. Sê maar ... enigiets wat pla, ek wil weet.”

“As Pappa nie êrens in New York is nie, beteken dit hy's dood, nè?”

Laura is vir 'n oomblik stomgeslaan deur die direktheid van Josh se vraag. Maar nou – 'n week na die ineenstorting van die World Trade Center – is die idee dat Eric moontlik dood is, nie meer so skokkend nie. Laura sluk en kyk in Josh se oë. “Dis reg, my skat. As hy nie in New York is nie, is hy dalk dood.”

“Oukei ... ” Die kind trek sy asem diep in en sit regop, sy oë stip in hare. Laura het hom nog nooit so senuweeagtig gesien nie. Sy mond werk vir 'n oomblik en hy sluk totdat hy sy stem kry. “As julle hom nie kry nie, kan oom Clay my pa wees?”

Haar seun se woorde is soos 'n skoot yskoue water in haar gesig wat maak dat sy vir 'n paar oomblikke nie kan asemhaal nie. Toe sy haar asem terugkry, trek sy haar seuntjie teen haar vas. Hoe kon Eric nie sien wat sy lang ure by die werk aan hulle seun doen nie? Die seuntjie ken nie sy pa nie en het hom ook nie lief nie. Trouens, Eric het nie net 'n dogter verloor toe hulle baba destyds dood is nie.

Hy het ook 'n seun verloor.

Sy wil nie huil nie, wil Josh nie laat dink dat hy iets verkeerds gedoen het deur sy hart teenoor haar oop te maak nie. Maar sy kan ook nie praat nie.

“Mamma?” Josh se stem is gesmoord teen haar skouer en hy sit terug om in haar oë te kyk. “Is Mamma kwaad vir my?”

“Nee, my kind. Ek ... ek verstaan.” In haar binneste voel dit vir Laura asof sy steeds na asem snak. Sy doen haar bes om ter wille van Josh normaal voor te kom.

“So ... ” Die kind hou sy kop skeep en pluk aan 'n wolletjie op sy kombers.

“Kan hy?”

“Wel ... ” *Here, maak my kalm ... gee my die regte woorde.* “Oom Clay sal altyd jou oom wees, Josh ... nie jou pa nie. Dis hoe die Here dit gemaak het.”

“O.” Haar seun se gesiggie val en hy laat sy kop hang. “Oukei.” Toe lig hy sy oë na haar. “Kan ek dan maar maak asof hy my pa is? Ek bedoel, as julle Pappa nie in New York kry nie?”

Wat kan sy sê? Sy hou Josh se handjies in hare en knik. “Oom Clay is baie lief vir jou, grootman. Hy sal nie omgee nie.”

“Sal die Here nie vir my kwaad wees nie?”

“Nee. Glad nie.”

“En Mamma?”

Haar hart breek, maar sy slaag daarin om te glimlag. Sy leun vooroor en soen Josh op sy neus en gee hom nog ’n drukkie voordat sy terugsit. “Die feit dat jy vir jou oom lief is, sal my nooit kwaad maak nie, my skat. Selfs al maak jy of hy jou pappa is.”

Nadat Clay Laura die volgende oggend kom oplaai het, ry hulle na die lughawe by Burbank. Hy het die vorige nag laat wakker gebly en ’n foto van Eric wat die vorige somer geneem is, gebruik om ’n strooibiljet te maak. Op die foto staan Eric agter ’n podium by ’n sakedinee. Eric het ’n toespraak gelewer en iemand van Koppel & Grant het die foto geneem. Eric het dit ’n paar weke later in sy laai gekry en dit huis toe gebring.

Die blaadjie is eenvoudig. Buiten Eric se naam en ’n fisiese beskrywing, staan daar dat hy op die vier-en-sestigste vloer van die suidelike toring gewerk het, en is daar drie telefoonnommers van mense wat gebel kan word indien iemand enige inligting het. Laura het honderd afskrifte in haar drasak.

’n Beperkte aantal vlugte is weer hervat, en hulle moes deur addisionele sekuriteitspunte beweeg voordat hulle aan boord kon gaan. Nadat hulle hul sakke in die oorhoofse kompartemente gebêre het, neem hulle hul sitplekke in, Clay langs die venster en Laura teen die paadjie.

“Ek’s bly ons gaan.” Laura gordel haarself vas en kyk deur die venster. “Anders sou ek altyd gewonder het.”

“Ja.” Clay kan homself nie sover bring om te glimlag nie. “Ek ook.”

Hulle raak stil en Clay draai na die venster. Is hulle regtig op pad New York toe? Om na Eric te gaan soek? ’n Week het verbygegaan en die idee dat Eric weg is, is nog net so onwerklik soos toe die aanvalle plaasgevind het. Dis nie net ter wille van Laura dat hy Manhattan toe gaan nie. Dis vir homself. Vandat Clay kon onthou, kon hy na Eric toe gaan wanneer hy wou praat. Hy en Eric was nog altyd eerlik met mekaar.

Totdat die probleme in Eric se huwelik begin het.

Deur New York toe te gaan, is daar ’n kans dat hy dalk sy ouboet sal opspoor. Dan kan hy hom in die oë kyk en vra wat gebeur het. Waarom het hy niks oor sy probleme by die huis gesê nie, en hoe kon hy sy werk al hierdie jare bo Laura en Josh gestel het? Laura wat hom net wou liefhê. As hy Eric opspoor, kan hulle twee dalk oor alles praat wat Eric nie gesê en gedoen het nie, en dalk, net dalk kan alles weer wees soos aan die begin.

Vir hulle almal.

Clay sit agteroor en probeer sy senuwees tot bedaring bring. Hy is ’n polisieman wat al in onvoorspelbare situasies met gewapende dwelms-handelaars of waansinnige bendeleders was. Maar toe die vliegtuig op die aanloopbaan versnel, is die vrees wat deur hom klief, groter as enigiets wat hy al ooit ervaar het. Nie omdat hy bang is vir vlieg nie. Maar omdat hy bang is vir wat hulle gaan aantref wanneer hulle in New York neerstryk. Bang dat hulle Eric nie by ’n reddingsmissie of in ’n tydelike ontruimingsentrum naby Ground Zero gaan opspoor nie. Maar dat hy iewers onder die puin

begrawe lê.

Clay knip sy oë en blaas sy asem stadig uit. *Kalm ... wees kalm vir Laura.* Die grondpersoneel is besig om bagasie in die vliegtuigromp te laai, en Clay maak sy oë toe en dink aan die magneet op sy yskasdeur. *Vertrou volkome op die Here en moenie op jou eie insigte staat maak nie. Ken Hom in alles wat jy doen en Hy sal jou die regte pad laat loop.* Die vers is soos water wat uit 'n droë skeur syfer en 'n dankbare kalmte kom nestel in sy hart. Die Here het hom nie versaak nie, ondanks sy vrese.

“Clay?” Laura raak aan sy hand en hy draai skuins om na haar te kyk. “Is jy oukei?”

“Jammer. Ek ... ” Sy hande span om sy knieë en hy ontmoet haar oë. “Ek het sommer sit en dink.”

“Kom ons bid.” Haar groen oë is gevul met 'n soort hoop en afwagting wat dalk heeltemal absurd is.

En tog, daar is 'n kans.

Een waarvoor hulle God se hulp nodig het. Hy neem haar hand en laat sak sy kop naby hare. “Here, bewaar ons op hierdie vlug, gee vir ons vrede. Maak ons vrese stil en lei en rig ons voetstappe wanneer ons in New York is.” Hy bly stil toe die vliegtuig opstyg. “Ag, Here, help ons om my broer te kry.”

Die volgende paar dae verloop in 'n waas van strooibiljette opplak en gesprekke voer met beampptes by hospitale en hawelose sentrums. Teen Maandag is Laura gedaan en gereed om huis toe te gaan. Die aanskoue van 'n verminkte Manhattan is meer as wat sy kan verduur. Sy en Clay het aparte kamers in die Marriot bespreek, maar wanneer hulle saans aan die einde van 'n vermoeiende dag in die stad terugkom, gaan lê hy op die bed langs Laura s'n en laat haar praat. Hulle gesels hoofsaaklik oor strategieë. Waar om plakstate op te sit, met wie om te praat, waar hulle nog kan gaan soek. Maar ongeag al hulle beplanning is die resultate op die ou end elke dag dieselfde.

“Ek's jammer, ons het hom nie gesien nie.”

“Nee, hy is nie hier nie – al ons pasiënte is reeds geïdentifiseer.”

“Nee, hy lyk nie bekend nie.”

In een stadium het hulle selfs in die gange van die Mount Sinai Medical Center op en af geloop in die hoop om Eric iewers te sien lê, onbekend en vergete. Maar elke pasiënt het 'n naam en minstens een besoeker gehad. Niemand het op 'n familielid gewag om in te stap en hulle te identifiseer nie.

Nou – met die naweek agter hulle, het Laura Clay oortuig dat hulle so naby moontlik aan Ground Zero moet kom. Hulle word by 'n paar kontrolepunte deurgelaat, bloot omdat hulle 'n afskrif van hulle strooibiljet uithaal en toestemming vra om dit nader aan die puinhoop te gaan opplak.

Hulle is 'n blok van die torings af toe hulle taxi deur 'n polisieman voorgekeer word. Hy loop tot by die bestuurder en maak 'n draaibeweging met sy hand. “Niemand word verder as hierdie punt toegelaat nie ... Julle sal moet omdraai.”

Laura draai haar venster af en voel hoe haar hart 'n slag mis. “My man was in

die suidelike toring.” Sy kyk vanaf die agtersitplek na die man en wys hom die strooibiljet met Eric se foto. “Ons is van Los Angeles. Asseblief ... kan ons ’n klein entjie verder gaan?”

“Niemand word verby hierdie punt toegelaat nie.” Die man plaas sy hande op sy heupe. Sy oë is ’n donker spieëling van alles wat hy sedert 11 September gesien het. “Niemand behalwe beamptes nie.”

Clay leun oor Laura se bene en kyk na die man. “Ek’s in die Los Angeles-polisiemag.” Hy wys na die blaadjie. “Die vermiste man is my broer. Is jy seker ons kan nie nader kom nie?”

Die man se gesig versag effens, maar hy skud nogtans sy kop. “Kyk ... dis amper twee weke sedert die torings neergestort het.” Hy wys na waar ’n tou stortvragmotors stadig teen die hoop puin opry. Die polisieman se stem kan skaars bo die geraas van masjinerie op die agtergrond gehoor word. “Glo my, as jou broer daar is, wil jy hom nie sien nie.”

“Ons sal nie bly nie,” hou Clay vol. “As ons net ’n paar plakkate kan opsit, sal ons ten minste voel dat ons ons bes gedoen het.”

Vir ’n oomblik kyk die man net na hulle. Sy oë beweeg van Clay na Laura, en dan weer na Clay. Sy mond is halfoop van verbasing. “Kan ek eerlik wees?”

“Beslis.” Clay se antwoord is vinnig.

Vir ’n breukdeel van ’n oomblik oorweeg Laura dit om haar ore toe te druk. Sy wil nie hê hy moet eerlik wees nie, nie so naby Ground Zero nie; sy wil vir Eric hê.

“Ek gee nie om wat hulle dit in die koerante noem nie, maar dis nie ’n reddingspoging nie.” Hy pers sy lippe opmekaar en alhoewel sy oë droog bly, bewes sy ken. “Dis ’n opruiming. En hulle sal gelukkig wees as hulle ’n paar honderd liggame kry.” Hy skud sy kop. “Dis hoe erg dit is.”

Die taxibestuurder gee hulle ’n kyk oor sy skouer. “Die meter loop.”

Laura ignoreer die bestuurder en kyk die polisieman in die oë. “Met ander woorde, ons mors ons tyd?” Clay sit steeds half bo-oor haar knieë. “Is dit wat jy sê?”

“Ja.” Hy snuif hard en kyk in die rigting van Ground Zero. “Almal wil glo dat die persoon wat hulle soek, vermis word, dame. Maar die feit is: Daar is nie meer vermiste persone nie. Al die pasiënte in al die hospitale is geïdentifiseer en daar is nie slagoffers by die sentrums vir haweloses nie.” Hy gooi sy hande in die lug en kyk haar weer in die oë. “Dis te laat. Jou man word nie vermis nie, dame. Hy is dood. Gaan terug Los Angeles toe en hou ’n roudiens vir hom. Probeer dan soos ons almal om aan te gaan met jou lewe.” Die man kyk na Clay en weer terug na haar. “Ek’s jammer.”

Hy tree terug, draai om en gil iets vir ’n polisieman aan die oorkant van die straat. Toe loop hy verby Laura en Clay na die taxi agter hulle. “Niemand word verby hierdie punt toegelaat nie,” gil hy. “Net amptelike personeel ...”

Clay sit regop en staar voor hom uit. Dan plant hy sy elmboë op sy knieë en laat sak sy kop in sy hande. Laura kyk na hom, en iets in haar binneste begin doodgaan, iets waarop sy nie heeltemal haar vinger kan lê nie. Gedurende elke



dag, elke uur sedert 11 September het Clay ter wille van haar sterk, positief, bemoedigend gebly. Selfs toe hulle die ergste moontlike scenario oorweeg het – dat Eric nooit sou huis toe kom nie – was hy versigtig optimisties.

Maar nie nou nie.

Laura maak haar oë vir 'n oomblik toe en hoor weer die polisieman se woorde. *Jou man word nie vermis nie, dame. Hy is dood ...*

As dit waar is, kan sy nie hier ineenstort nie, nie in 'n taxi in Manhattan met 'n angstige bestuurder wat haar van die voorste sitplek af kyke gee nie. Sy trek haar asem vinnig in en plaas haar hand op Clay se knie. “Clay ... ”

Na 'n paar sekondes kyk hy na haar. Sy betraande oë verklap dat hy dieselfde dink. Dis verby ... die soektog, die tweede kans, die hoop dat Eric ooit gaan huis toe kom. Dis alles verby. Sy leun vorentoe en tik die bestuurder op die skouer. “Die Marriot, asseblief.”

Hulle inspanning in New York het tot niks gekom nie. Met sy stomp woorde het die polisieman alles gesê wat hulle moes weet. Dis tyd om huis toe te gaan, 'n diens vir Eric te hou en met die res van hulle lewe voort te gaan.

# Chapter TWENTY-THREE

SEPTEMBER 25, 2001

The day of reckoning arrived on Tuesday, September 25, two weeks after the terrorist attacks. That morning Jamie was in Jake's hospital room, sitting by his side, when Dr. Cleary walked in and gave them a crooked smile.

"Today's the day." He planted himself near the doorway and studied Jake. "How're you feeling?"

"Ready." Jake sat up straighter in bed and stretched his arms forward. "I was ready yesterday."

Much of the bandaging had been removed from Jake's cheeks and head, and the shock of seeing his burned face was wearing off. Beneath the red and blistered skin, he was still Jake Bryan, the only man she'd ever loved. And he'd heal eventually. There'd be a few light scars, but otherwise it was only a matter of time before he looked more like her husband and less like an accident victim.

With the bandages off, Jake could talk easier than before. His voice was still a bit raspy, but from everything he'd told Jamie, he was feeling well enough to go home.

"Yesterday your white count was still a little high." The doctor crossed the room and found Jake's chart at the end of his bed. "Today's numbers are better."

An hour passed while Dr. Cleary handled Jake's release papers, and sometime around ten o'clock that morning, Jake fell asleep. Jamie watched, awed at how quickly he was making a comeback.

A physical comeback, anyway.

He still didn't remember anything more than Sierra, but if his body was healing, Jamie could only hope that very soon his mind would, also.

Infection in Jake's arm had set in a week ago, and at one point Jake's

fever had spiked to nearly 104 degrees. Dr. Cleary explained that infection was common where second-degree burns and lacerations were concerned, and rather than send Jake home on antibiotics, he'd kept him in the hospital and administered them through an IV. Jake had finished the treatment a full twenty-four hours ago, so there was nothing more to keep Jake in the hospital.

Jamie was actually glad.

For one thing, she no longer had any doubts that the man in the bed beside her was her husband, Jake. Even with his painful-looking burns, the face was definitely Jake's. The blue eyes and rugged lines that had been his trademark since he was a teenager. Regardless of his memory loss, this was the man she had married. In some ways Jamie wished the bandages had come off earlier—back when she'd been crazy with fear that somehow there'd been a mistake, a mix-up. At first she'd dreaded Jake's homecoming, especially the idea of setting him up in a guest room when he belonged in bed beside her. Now that she was sure the man was Jake, she was beyond anxious to get him home and help him regain his memory.

Over the past ten days—while Jake's father stayed at the house with Sierra—Jamie had spent every day and several nights at the hospital, cozying up in a chair next to his bed and covering herself with whatever blankets the nurses could find for her. In the process something was happening.

She and Jake were becoming friends.

The connection between them had come gradually, in small bits of conversation and shy glances, but it was happening. That much was obvious. They'd be watching a rerun of the *Cosby Show* on his hospital TV, and they'd laugh at the same funny line. Then he would shoot a quick look in her direction, and she'd see something familiar. The hint of a sparkle in his eyes, the seeds of a smile.

She had asked Jake if he wanted to play cards or read or work on a puzzle while he was in the hospital, and he'd tried all three. He couldn't

remember any card games, but one day last weekend he stared out the window for a moment until suddenly his eyes lit up. “Backgammon. I think I know how to play backgammon.”

“Okay.” The statement had taken Jamie by surprise. The two of them had played backgammon back when they were first married, but only for one summer. They were too active to spend much time indoors, and both of them quickly tired of the game.

But still, if Jake remembered it, that had to be a good sign. Jamie had dug through their basement storage area, found the old backgammon set she'd bought years earlier, and brought it to the hospital. Since then they'd played it several times each day, and more often lately, Jake would make a move and follow it with a friendly comment or competitive gibe. Something like “Try beating that” or “Nice move.”

Constantly, Jamie would catch herself wanting to share some memory with him, something about Sierra or some time in their past, but always she caught herself. Dr. Cleary had been adamant that at first all communication had to be kept in the present. As though they were starting all over again.

One afternoon, when they'd had enough backgammon, Jamie found an old puzzle in the hospital waiting room and set it out at the end of Jake's bed. His ankle was still in the cast, but he slid it over to create a surface for the puzzle. For three hours straight, they worked the pieces into first a frame, and then a complete picture. Every few minutes their fingers would brush against each other while they worked, and sometimes Jamie would lift her eyes to find him watching her.

She'd been tempted to bring Jake's journal and his Bible into the hospital, but in the end she decided to wait. It'd be better for him to read those while sitting on their bed—sometime when Jamie wasn't around. He might remember better that way, encouraged by the combination of a familiar setting and deeply precious words that not so long ago had meant the world to him.

Instead, she'd brought him John Grisham novels—his favorite before

getting hurt. She had laid three of them out on his bedside and watched while he picked them up, one at a time, and looked them over.

“Interesting.” He’d lifted his eyes to hers.

“You remember them?” Jamie had been breathless, having walked up the stairs to his floor. She wasn’t working out, wasn’t playing racquetball or jet-skiing. If it wasn’t for the stairs, she’d go stir crazy with how sedentary her life had become.

“No.” He looked at the books again. “But I’ll try to read them.”

Jake’s reading skills were fine, but his headaches weren’t. Whenever he tried to read more than a few paragraphs, he’d close his eyes and rub them, grimacing from the pain. At that point she’d take over, reading the text out loud, stopping now and then when he’d have a question.

“So, wait a minute. Is the book about that guy or the other one?”

“Which one?”

“The one in the first chapter.”

Once in a while Jamie’s mind would go blank, and Jake would raise an eyebrow at her. “Hey, I’m the one with amnesia, okay?”

They would both giggle, and the sound of their combined laughter would ring so clear and true in Jamie’s heart she would be convinced beyond a doubt that Jake was returning to her. That he was making his way back through the mire of forgotten moments to a place where they could live and love and laugh again, a place where they could resume life where they’d left off.

There’d been hard times that week too. Times when she’d be staring at Jake, watching him sleep, and he would wake up and see her. Instead of the smile she was used to, he’d jerk back, his eyes filled with confusion and fear. “Where am I?” he’d ask. Other times he’d sit straight up in bed glancing around the room, caught in some nightmare.

Jamie was handling those moments better now, because all of Dr. Cleary’s predictions were coming true. She was becoming her husband’s friend, and once they were able to go home—in just a few hours now—that

friendship would grow until finally the flashbacks began. After that it would only be a matter of weeks before he would remember everything about his past and they could get on with the business of living.

Jake was still sleeping, so Jamie kept her voice to barely a whisper as she called Jim Bryan and told him the news.

“He's coming home.” She was excited, but she could hear the fear and doubts in her voice all the same. They had miles of ground to claim back before she could truly celebrate. “His burns look good and the infection's gone.”

“What time should I be there?”

“One o'clock.” Jamie soaked in the sight of Jake. Even with his burns he was handsome, and if he never looked the same again, that didn't matter. His memory was worth more than anything else.

“I'll get Sierra ready.”

They'd made the plan days ago. When it was time for Jake to come home, his father would bring Sierra and leave her with Jamie and Jake. Then the older Bryan would head back home straight from the hospital, just as Dr. Cleary had ordered. Jamie had left her car at the ferry parking lot back in Staten Island. She and Jake and Sierra would take a cab to the ferry, make their way across the harbor, and then drive their car home.

Jake's father had decided that once he went home, he'd take a driving trip across the country to visit his brother-in-law in Arizona. He'd spend a few months there until Jake was better and could handle visits.

Jamie sat back to wait. All the hours and days of living at the hospital and wondering when Jake would be well enough to go home were finally coming to an end. The first part of the nightmare was almost over. The tips of her fingers trembled as she folded her hands and counted the minutes.

Just before noon someone brought in two meal trays and Jake's release papers. An hour later a familiar nurse showed up with crutches and a wheelchair. “Your chariot, Mr. Bryan.”

Jamie carried the crutches and a bag full of cards and gifts from her

and Sierra and the guys at the station.

“You two need a cab?” The nurse glanced at Jamie as she wheeled Jake down the hallway, into the elevator, and out to the front of the hospital.

“Not yet. We're waiting for my father-in-law.”

The woman helped Jake from the wheelchair to his feet, and Jamie handed him the crutches, working to fit them under his arms. Jake was thinner than before, ten, maybe fifteen pounds, and the size in his shoulders had atrophied some. But the doctor had said that was normal after an extended hospital stay.

Jamie's fingers brushed along the length of Jake's arms as she helped him tighten his grip on the hand rests of each crutch. The feel of her fingers against his muscled arm was more familiar than anything she'd experienced since he'd been hurt. He'd lost some weight, but his arms were still lean and defined, the way they'd always been. Suddenly, his nearness made her heartbeat double, and she chided herself. *Come on, Jamie. Platonic ... remember?*

The nurse took a step back and smiled at them through teary eyes. Then she patted Jake on the shoulder. “Listen now ...” She uttered a cough and tried to regain her composure. “You stay away from here, okay? We need you heroes back on the streets.”

“Okay.” Jake leaned into the crutches and tried to smile.

Jamie saw the now familiar confusion in his eyes. When the woman was gone, Jake's father pulled up in his Lincoln sedan, with Sierra buckled into the backseat. He stopped the car and helped her out.

The moment she was free, her face lit up, and she darted across the sidewalk to Jake. “Daddy!” She grinned at Jamie for a brief moment and then threw her arms around her father's legs. “You're coming home!”

Jamie studied Jake's face. She could see the awkwardness he was struggling with, and for a second, she feared what he might say. But then he smiled, and she sighed with relief.

“Hi, Sierra.” He cast a hurried look at Jamie, and then back at Sierra.  
“I missed you, honey.”

Jake's father nodded at Jamie. “We'll be talking, okay?”

She went to him and hugged him. “Thanks for everything.” She pulled back and searched his eyes. “I couldn't have done it without you.”

“Let me know when he starts to remember.” Jake's father cast a casual look at Jake. “Take care of yourself. I'll be praying for you.”

Jake nodded but said nothing. He let his gaze fall to his hands.

Without drawing out the moment any further, Jim Bryan waved once more at Jamie and kissed Sierra on the cheek. Then he climbed in his car and pulled away. After he was gone, Sierra grabbed hold of Jamie's fingers, and with the other hand, she clasped the lower part of Jake's left crutch. Jamie flagged down a cab, and when it pulled up, they climbed in—Jake on one side of Sierra, Jamie on the other.

“Ferry docks, please.” Jamie turned her attention to Sierra. She couldn't remember when she'd seen the child so happy, and the best part was this—Sierra had no idea about Jake's memory loss. Dr. Cleary had said it was better that way, and that her assumption that all things were normal with Jake might help Jake's memory return sooner.

“Okay, Daddy.” Sierra bounced up and down on the seat. “Let's sing.”

Jake shifted so that his back was partially against the car door.  
“Sing?”

“Come on, Daddy.” Sierra giggled. “The song we always sing when we're in the car.”

Jake lifted his eyes above their daughter and sent Jamie a desperate look. “Help!” He mouthed the word so that Sierra would miss the exchange.

Jamie cleared her throat and cut in on the moment. “Honey, Daddy's voice is still a little scratchy. How 'bout you and me start it.”

Sierra's eyes clouded some. “Okay. It's the song me and Daddy sing when we go to church.”



Again Jake met Jamie's eyes. This time he whispered just one word. "Church?"

Jamie nodded and had to resist the urge to laugh out loud. As hard as the next few months would be, she would survive it better by looking for the humor. And the idea that Jake Bryan didn't know he attended church was so strange it was almost comical.

Jamie cleared her throat. "I think I can give it a try."

"But, Mommy ..." Sierra's expression was part frown, part pout. "You don't know it."

Jamie raised her eyebrows at her daughter. "I think I can pull it off." She paused a beat and began to sing. "Jesus loves me," Jamie let her eyes move from Sierra to Jake, "this I know ..."

Sierra sat a little straighter and chimed in. "For the Bible tells me so...."

The song continued, and Jamie studied Jake's face, looking for any sign of recognition. Now and then something familiar lit up his eyes, and by the time Sierra began the second round, Jake joined in, his raspy voice joining theirs. As he did, Jamie gradually stopped and fell silent. In that moment she couldn't have sung if she'd wanted to. The lump in her throat as she watched Jake and Sierra singing together would've made it impossible. Halfway through the song, with Sierra still bouncing to the beat, Jake reached out and took their daughter's hand. When Jamie's eyes met his in the space above Sierra's head, the corners of Jake's mouth lifted just enough to notice.

Sierra chattered and sang the entire way home—during the drive to the docks, throughout the ferry ride across the harbor, and all along the final few minutes as they drove down their street. When they finally pulled into their driveway, Jamie caught a quick look at Jake. He was tiring fast. Dr. Cleary had warned about that too. The combination of head injury and burns meant Jake should get set up in the guest room and lie low for a few weeks. Until his energy returned.

They headed inside, and Jake made small circles in the foyer, casting quick looks in ten different directions as he soaked in the surroundings. *It's as though he's never seen it before*, Jamie thought. The truth of the matter made her heart ache, but there was nothing she could do about it. He would remember it one day, just not yet.

Sierra watched Jake, his strange circles and baffled expression, and her little face became a mask of sudden confusion. "What're you doing, Daddy?"

Her question snapped him back to the moment, and he turned with a jolt toward their daughter. "Uh ..."

"Come on." Sierra didn't let him finish. "It's time for my horsey ride."

Jamie stepped in and patted Sierra on the head. "Sweetheart, Daddy's tired. Why don't you go up to your room and play with Sarabelle."

"Ahh, Mommy, do I have to?" She clung to Jake's crutch and leaned her head against his side. "I want Daddy to give me a horsey ride."

The singing in the car, the horsey rides ... there were dozens of routines they'd known as a family, routines Jamie could've shared with Jake while he was in the hospital. But the doctor had advised against it.

"Let those things happen naturally, in the setting where they're the most familiar to Jake," he'd told her. "That way he's more likely to remember them."

At the mention of the horsey rides, Jake blinked and gave Sierra a light shrug of his shoulders. Once more he shot Jamie a desperate look. She gave him a slight nod, dropped to her knees, and hugged Sierra for a moment. "Daddy wants to play horsie too, honey. But right now he has a hurt leg and he needs a nap. You can talk to him later, okay?"

"Okay." Sierra made a sweet frown, one that immediately turned into a smile as she looked up at Jake. "I'm glad you're home, Daddy. I missed you bunches and bunches."

When Sierra had trudged upstairs and disappeared into her bedroom, Jake turned to Jamie and blinked. "I have two daughters?"

“Two daughters?” A ripple of concern stirred the already troubled waters of Jamie's soul. Was Jake suffering delusions on top of his memory loss? “What makes you think that?”

He looked up the stairs in the direction of Sierra's room. “Who's Sarabelle?”

A burst of laughter started low in Jamie's throat, and she tried to stifle it. Nothing good could come from her laughing at Jake, no matter how crazy his questions. But something about standing in the foyer of the home they'd lived in all their lives, discussing whether Sierra's baby doll might actually be a second daughter, was so ludicrously funny, Jamie couldn't stop herself.

Her laughter came swift and full, and knocked her back against the wall. Jake watched her, and when Jamie stopped laughing long enough to catch her breath, he leaned forward, his eyebrows slightly raised. “Either Sarabelle's even more adorable than Sierra, or I said something funny.”

Jamie was breathing hard, and she reveled in the feeling. How long had it been since she'd laughed? She dabbed at the corners of her eyes. “Sarabelle's ... a doll. Sierra's had her since she was two.”

Jake gave a single shake of his head and looked relieved. “That's good. Between horsey rides and Jesus songs, I have enough to handle without some surprise second daughter waiting in the bedroom upstairs.”

The laughter faded, and Jamie straightened herself. She didn't want to ask; she wasn't supposed to, really. But she had to know the answer to at least some of what Jake was feeling. “Do ... do you remember it? Any of it?”

Jake gave her a sad smile and shook his head. “It's like I've never been here a day in my life.”

Her gaze fell to the floor for a moment, and she sucked in a quick breath. When their eyes met once more she worked her mouth into a smile. “Time ... everything in time.” Then she walked past him and motioned for him to follow. “The guest room's this way.”

He took two steps in that direction, but then stopped. “Wait a minute.”

“Yes?” Jamie turned around, and for the first time since they'd left the hospital, she took in the full-length sight of him. There were still bandages on both his arms, though less now than a few days ago. What showed was blotchy and red, but Jamie had to agree with the doctor. It didn't look like it would scar. As for his face, there were gauze pads on both cheeks and beneath his chin, but otherwise it was covered only with a fine layer of ointment—something Jamie would have to spread over his burns every four hours.

It was easy to look past the injuries and see Jake the way he'd looked just two weeks earlier. Tall and handsome, the man she'd woken up beside every morning for years.

She snapped herself from the distraction. Jake was still stopped, still studying her, his eyes full of concern.

“What's wrong?” She was careful not to use terms of endearment with him. Nothing that would make him feel uncomfortable.

Jake bit his lower lip and his eyes searched hers. “The guest room?”

Jamie was sure her cheeks must've turned an instant shade of red, because a wave of heat flashed from her scalp to her collarbone. Her eyes fell to her shoes for a beat and then met his once more. “That's ... that's where you'll be staying until ...”

He finished her sentence, his scratchy voice softer than before. “Until I remember?”

“Yes.” She nodded. “Until then.”

“Is that okay with you?”

Compassion filled his partially bandaged face, and she was touched. “Yes ...” They were treading unsteady ground, and she faced him full on, her arms crossed. “It was Dr. Cleary's suggestion.”

“Okay ... good.”

And in that instant Jamie had a sudden understanding of just how far

they still had to go. Because in the past, Jake would have been sorely disappointed to be confined to a bed other than the one he'd shared with Jamie. But the look on Jake's face now was far from disappointment.

It was relief.

## **Drie-en-twintig**

25 September 2001

Dis Dinsdag 25 September en die groot dag het uiteindelik aangebreek, twee weke na die terroriste-aanvalle. Jamie sit die oggend in Jake se hospitaalkamer langs hom toe dr. Cleary inkom en breed vir hulle glimlag.

“Vandag is die dag.” Hy gaan staan naby die deur en kyk ondersoekend na Jake. “Hoe voel jy?”

“Gereed.” Jake sit regop in die bed en strek sy arms voor hom uit. “Ek was gister al gereed.”

Die meeste van die verbande om Jake se wange en kop is verwyder, en die aanvanklike skok toe sy sy gebrande gesig die eerste keer gesien het, het al vervaag. Onder die rooi vel en die blase is hy nog steeds Jake Bryan, die enigste man wat sy ooit liefgehad het. En sy woude sal uiteindelik genees. Daar sal 'n paar ligte letsels wees, maar met verloop van tyd sal hy meer en meer soos haar man en minder soos 'n slagoffer lyk.

Sonder die verbande kan Jake makliker as voorheen praat. Sy stem is nog effens skor, maar te oordeel aan alles wat hy vir Jamie gesê het, voel hy goed genoeg om huis toe te gaan.

“Gister was jou witbloedseltelling nog 'n bietjie hoog.” Die dokter loop nader en kyk na Jake se pasiëntekaart aan die voetenent van sy bed. “Vandag se telling is beter.”

'n Uur gaan verby terwyl dr. Cleary Jake se ontslagdokumente hanteer en om en by tienuur raak Jake aan die slaap. Jamie hou hom dop, verwonderd oor hoe vinnig hy herstel.

Fisies, in elk geval.

Hy onthou steeds niks meer as Sierra nie, maar as sy liggaam kan herstel, kan Jamie maar net hoop dat sy verstand ook binnekort sal.

Jake het 'n week gelede infeksie in sy arm gekry en in een stadium het hy 'n koors van veertig grade gehad. Dr. Cleary het verduidelik dat infeksie algemeen by tweedegraadse brandwonde en skeurwonde voorkom, en eerder as om Jake met antibiotika huis toe te stuur, het hy hom in die hospitaal gehou en die medikasie binnears toegedien. Hy het die behandeling 'n volle vier-en-twintig uur gelede voltooi, en nou is daar niks meer wat Jake in die hospitaal hou nie.

Jamie is dankbaar.

Sy twyfel nie meer daaraan dat die man in die bed langs haar Jake is nie. Ten spyte van die brandwonde behoort die gesig definitief aan haar man. Die blou oë en sterk gelaatstrekke wat sedert sy tienerjare so kenmerkend van hom was, is syne. Ongeag sy geheueverlies is hy die man met wie sy getrou het. In sommige opsigte wens Jamie dat die verbande vroeër afgekom het – toe sy aanvanklik vreesbevange was dat daar op 'n manier 'n fout, 'n misverstand was. Aan die begin het sy Jake se tuiskoms gevrees, veral die feit dat sy die gastekamer vir hom moes inrig terwyl hy veronderstel is om langs haar in die bed te slaap. Noudat sy seker is die man is wel Jake, is sy gretig om hom huis toe te neem en hom te help om sy geheue terug te kry.

In die loop van die afgelope tien dae – terwyl Jake se pa tuis by Sierra gebly het – het Jamie elke dag en selfs 'n paar nagte in die hospitaal deurgebring. Sy sou in 'n stoel langs sy bed opkrul en een van die hospitaalkomberse oor haar trek. In dié tyd het daar iets begin gebeur.

Sy en Jake was besig om vriende te word.

Die aanklank tussen hulle het geleidelik gekom, met terloopse gesprekke en skugter kyke, maar dis duidelik dat 'n band besig was om te vorm. Daarvan is sy seker. Hulle sou na 'n herhaling van die *Cosby Show* op die televisie in sy kamer kyk en wanneer hulle vir dieselfde pittigheid lag, sou hy 'n vinnige kyk in haar rigting gee, en dan het sy iets bekends gesien. 'n Effense glinstering in sy oë, die begin van 'n glimlag.

Sy het Jake gevra of hy wou kaartspeel of lees of aan 'n legkaart werk terwyl hy in die hospitaal was, en hy het al drie probeer. Hy kon nie enige kaartspeletjies onthou nie, maar verlede naweek het hy vir 'n oomblik deur die venster gestaar voordat sy oë skielik opgehelder het. “Backgammon. Ek dink ek weet hoe om backgammon te speel.”

“O, goed.” Jamie was ietwat verbaas. As jonggetroudes het hulle backgammon gespeel, maar net vir een somer. Hulle was te aktief om baie tyd in die huis deur te bring, en hulle albei was gou uitgekuier met die speletjie.

Maar as Jake dit onthou, is dit 'n goeie teken. Jamie het in hulle stoorkamer gaan rondkrap, die ou backgammon-stel gekry en dit hospitaal toe gebring. Sedertdien speel hulle dit elke dag, en deesdae sal Jake 'n skuif maak en dit met 'n goedige of kompeterende opmerking volg. Iets soos: “Wat sê jy nou?” of “Goeie skuif.”

Jamie betrap haarself gedurig dat sy die een of ander herinnering met hom wil deel, iets oor Sierra of 'n tyd in hulle verlede, maar sy keer haarself altyd betyds. Dr. Cleary het dit baie duidelik gemaak dat alle kommunikasie aanvanklik tot die hede beperk moet word. Asof hulle van voor af begin.

Toe hulle een middag genoeg van backgammon gehad het, het Jamie 'n ou legkaart in die hospitaal se wagkamer gekry en dit op die onderpunt van Jake se bed uitgepak. Sy enkel was steeds in gips, maar hy het dit weggeskuif om plek te maak. Dit het hulle 'n volle drie uur gekos om eers die raam te bou, en toe die hele prentjie te voltooi. Elke paar minute het hulle vingers terloops aan mekaar geraak terwyl hulle gewerk het, en soms sou Jamie opkyk en hom

betrap dat hy haar dophou.

Sy was in die versoeking om Jake se Bybel en dagboek hospitaal toe te bring, maar op die ou end het sy besluit om te wag. Dit sou vir hom beter wees om daaruit te lees wanneer hy tuis op hulle bed gesit het – een of ander tyd wanneer Jamie nie daar was nie. Die kombinasie van 'n bekende omgewing en die kosbare woorde wat 'n paar dae gelede nog alles vir hom beteken het, sou hom dalk help om beter te onthou.

In plaas daarvan het sy met John Grisham-boeke opgedaag – sy gunsteling voordat hy seergekry het. Sy het drie van hulle op sy bedkassie neergesit en gekyk hoe hy hulle een vir een optel en bestudeer.

“Interessant.” Hy het sy oë na haar gelig.

“Onthou jy hulle?” Jamie was kortasem nadat sy met die trappe opgekom het. Sy kom nie by haar oefeninge uit nie; sy speel nie tennis nie en daar is vanselfsprekend nie tyd vir die waterponie nie. As dit nie vir die trappe was nie, sou die passiwiteit haar rasend van frustrasie gehad het.

“Nee.” Hy het weer na die boeke gekyk. “Maar ek sal probeer om hulle te lees.”

Jake se leesvaardigheid makeer niks nie, maar hy kry nog kwaai hoofpyn. Elke keer wanneer hy 'n paar paragrawe gelees het, vryf hy sy oë. Dan neem sy oor en lees vir hom voor. Nou en dan luister sy as hy 'n vraag het.

“Wag net gou 'n oomblik. Gaan die boek oor hierdie ou of die ander een?”

“Watter een?”

“Die een in die eerste hoofstuk.”

Soms kon sy nie dadelik dink nie en dan het Jake met 'n geligte wenkbrou na haar gekyk. “Hei, ek's die een met amnesie, nie jy nie.”

Die klank van hulle saamlag was so wonderlik bekend dat Jamie daarvan oortuig was Jake was besig om na haar toe terug te keer. Dat hy deur die modder van vergete oomblikke na 'n plek toe terugkeer waar hulle weer kan lewe en liefhê en lag, 'n plek waar hulle kan aangaan waar hulle opgehou het.

Maar die week was ook nie sonder sy moeilike oomblikke nie. Soos wanneer sy na Jake kyk terwyl hy slaap en hy wakker word en haar sien. In plaas van die glimlag waaraan sy gewoond was, sou hy ruk, sy oë vol verwarring en vrees. “Waar is ek?” het hy dan gevra. Daar was ook tye wanneer hy skielik regop gesit en in die kamer rondgekyk het, steeds in die greep van 'n nagmerrie.

Jamie hanteer daardie oomblikke nou beter, want al dr. Cleary se voorspellings is besig om waar te word. Sy is besig om haar man se vriendin te word, en sodra hulle kan huis toe gaan – nou oor net 'n paar ure – sal daardie vriendskap aanhou ontwikkel totdat die terugflitse uiteindelik begin. Daarna sal dit net 'n kwessie van weke wees voordat hy alles van sy verlede sal onthou en hulle met hulle lewe kan voortgaan.

Jake slaap nog; dus praat Jamie in 'n fluisterstem toe sy Jim Bryan bel.

“Hy kan vandag huis toe kom.” Ten spyte van haar opgewondenheid kan sy die vrees en onsekerheid in haar stem hoor. Daar is nog soveel wat hulle moet

herwin voordat sy dit werklik kan vier. “Sy woude lyk goed en die infeksie het opgeklaar.”

“Hoe laat moet ek daar wees?”

“So eenuur.” Jamie kyk na Jake. Ten spyte van sy brandwonde is hy ’n aantreklike man, en selfs al lyk hy nooit weer dieselfde nie, maak dit nie saak nie. Sy geheue is belangriker as enigiets anders.

“Ek sal sorg dat Sierra gereed is.”

Hulle het dit twee dae gelede afgespreek. Wanneer Jake ontslaan word, sal sy pa Sierra hospitaal toe bring en haar by Jamie en Jake los. Dan sal die ouer Bryan reguit huis toe gaan, nes dr. Cleary voorgestel het. Jamie het haar motor by die veerboot op Staten Island gelos. Sy en Jake en Sierra sal met ’n taxi hawe toe gaan, die veerboot neem en met hulle eie motor huis toe ry.

Jake se pa het besluit wanneer hy tuiskom, wil hy by sy swaer in Arizona gaan kuier. Hy sal ’n paar maande daar bly totdat Jake beter is en besoeke kan hanteer.

Jamie sit langs Jake se bed en wag. Al die ure en dae wat sy in die hospitaal deurgebring het en gewonder het of Jake ooit gesond genoeg sal wees om huis toe te gaan, is uiteindelik op ’n end. Die eerste deel van die nagmerrie is amper verby. Haar vingerpunte bewe toe sy haar arms vou en die minute aftel. Net voor twaalf bring iemand twee skinkborde kos en Jake se ontslagvorms. En ’n uur later maak een van die susters haar opwagting met krukke en ’n rolstoel. “U koets, meneer Bryan.”

Jamie dra die krukke en ’n sak vol kaartjies en geskenke van haar en Sierra en die ouens by die stasie.

“Het julle twee ’n taxi nodig?” Die verpleegster kyk na Jamie nadat hulle met die hysbak afgery het en sy Jake na die hospitaal se hoofingang stoot.

“Nog nie. Ons wag eers vir my skoonpa.”

Die vrou help Jake uit die rolstoel en Jamie help hom om op die krukke te balanseer. Jake is maerder as voorheen, seker so vyf of sewe kilogram ligter en sy skouers effens krommer. Maar die dokter sê dis normaal nadat iemand so lank in die hospitaal was.

Jamie help Jake om sy greep op die handvatsels van die twee krukke te verstewig. Die gevoel van sy gespieerde arms onder haar vingers is meer bekend as enigiets wat sy sedert sy besering ervaar het. Hy het ’n bietjie gewig verloor, maar sy arms is nog skraal en gedefinieerd. Sy nabyheid laat haar hartklop onverwags versnel, en sy moet haarself aanspreek. *Kom nou, Jamie. Platonies ... onthou?*

Die verpleegster staan terug en glimlag deur betraande oë vir hulle. Toe tik sy Jake op die skouer. “Luister mooi ... ” Sy kug en probeer haar selfbeheersing herwin. “Sorg dat jy nie weer hier beland nie, oukei? Ons het julle helde op straat nodig.”

“Oukei.” Jake kry sy staan met sy krukke en probeer glimlag.

Jamie sien die nou reeds bekende verwarring in sy oë. Toe die vrou weg is, hou Jake se pa voor hulle stil, Sierra in haar motorstoeltjie agter in sy Lincoln.



Hy parkeer en help haar uit.

Die oomblik toe haar gordel los is, verhelder haar gesiggie en pyl sy reguit op Jake af. “Pappa!” Sy glimlag vlugtig vir Jamie voordat sy haar arms om haar pa se bene slaan. “Pappa kom vandag huis toe!”

Jamie bestudeer Jake se gesig. Sy bemerk die ongemak waarmee hy stoei en vir ’n oomblik is sy bang vir wat hy gaan sê. Maar dan glimlag hy en sy sug van verligting.

“Hallo, Sierra.” Hy kyk haastig na Jamie en dan weer na Sierra. “Ek het jou gemis, my skat.”

Jake se pa knik vir Jamie. “Ons bel mekaar, oukei?”

Sy gaan gee hom ’n drukkie. “Dankie vir alles.” Toe staan sy terug en kyk ondersoekend in sy oë. “Ek sou dit nie sonder Pa kon doen nie.”

“Laat weet my sodra hy begin onthou.” Jim kyk vriendelik na Jake. “Kyk mooi na jouself. Ek bid vir julle.”

Jake knik, maar sê niks nie en kyk af na sy hande.

Sonder om die oomblik langer uit te rek, wuif Jim nog ’n keer vir Laura en soen Sierra op die wang. Hy klim in sy motor en trek weg. Ná hy weg is, kry Sierra Jamie aan haar vingers beet en hou met haar ander hand aan die onderste deel van Jake se kruk vas. Jamie wuif ’n taxi nader en toe hulle inklim, sit Jake en Jamie aan weerskante van Sierra.

“Die veerboothawe, asseblief.” Jamie wend haar na Sierra. Sy kan nie onthou wanneer laas sy die kind so gelukkig gesien het nie. Dis ’n genade dat Sierra geen idee van Jake se geheueverlies het nie. Dr. Cleary het gesê dit sal beter wees. Die dogtertjie se natuurlike optrede kan dalk maak dat Jake se geheue gouer sal terugkeer.

“Oukei, Pappa.” Sierra wip op en af op die sitplek. “Kom ons sing.”

Jake draai sodat sy rug half teen die motordeur is. “Sing?”

“Kom nou, Pappa.” Sierra giggel. “Die liedjie wat ons altyd sing as ons in die kar is.”

Jake gee Jamie ’n desperate kyk bo-oor hulle dogtertjie se kop. “Help!” Hy vorm die woord met sy lippe sodat Sierra nie kan hoor nie.

Jamie maak keel skoon en onderbreek die oomblik. “Pappa se stem is nog ’n bietjie krapperig, liefie. Kom ek en jy begin solank.”

Sierra se gesiggie val effens. “Oukei. Dis die liedjie wat ek en Pappa altyd sing as ons kerk toe ry.”

Jake vang weer Jamie se oog. Hierdie keer fluister hy net een woord. “Kerk?”

Jamie knik en moet haar inhou om nie hardop te lag nie. Hoe moeilik die volgende paar maande ook al gaan wees, sy gaan dit beter hanteer as sy die humor daarin raaksien. En die idee dat Jake Bryan nie weet hy gaan kerk toe nie, is so vreemd dat dit amper komies is.

Jamie maak keel skoon. “Kom ek probeer.”

“Maar, Mamma ...” Sierra frons met ’n pruilmondjie. “Mamma weet nie hoe dit gaan nie.”

Jamie lig haar wenkbroue vir haar dogtertjie. “Gee my darem eers ’n kans.”

Sy aarsel 'n oomblik en begin dan sing. “Jesus min my ...” Jamie se oë gaan van Sierra na Jake “... salig lot ...”

Sierra sit 'n bietjie meer regop en val in. “Dit leer ek uit die Woord van God ...”

Hulle sing verder en Jamie bestudeer Jake se gesig vir enige teken van herkenning. Nou en dan verhelder sy oë, en teen die tyd dat Sierra met die tweede rondte wegval, begin Jake in 'n skor stem saamsing. Nadat sy nog 'n rukkie saamgesing het, verstil Jamie se stem. Sy kan nie verder sing nie, al wou sy ook. Die knop in haar keel om Jake en Sierra so te sien sing, maak dit onmoontlik. Halfpad deur die liedjie, met Sierra wat steeds op die maat van die musiek wip, steek Jake sy hand uit en neem hulle dogtertjie s'n. Toe Jamie se oë syne bokant Sierra ontmoet, lig Jake se mondhoëke net-net merkbaar.

Sierra klets en sing die hele pad huis toe – gedurende die rit na die dokke, tydens die veerbootrit oor die hawe tot Jamie by hulle oprit indraai. Toe hulle stilhou, kyk Jamie onderlangs na Jake. Hy word gou moeg. Dr. Cleary het hulle daaroor ook gewaarsku. Die kombinasie van die hoofbesering en brandwonde beteken dat Jake in die gastekamer gemaklik gemaak moet word en vir 'n paar weke moet rus. Totdat hy sy kragte herwin het.

Hulle gaan in en in die voorportaal draai Jake stadig in die rondte. Sy oë flits in tien verskillende rigtings terwyl hy alles om hom probeer inneem. *Dis asof hy dit nog nooit tevore gesien het nie*, dink Jamie. Dit maak haar hartseer, maar daar is niks wat sy daaraan kan doen nie. Hy sal dit eendag onthou, net nie nou al nie.

Sierra kyk hoe Jake in die rondte draai, sien sy oorblufte uitdrukking, en daar verskyn 'n verwarde uitdrukking op haar klein gesiggie. “Pappa, wat doen jy?”

Haar vraag bring hom terug na die werklikheid en hy swaai om na haar. “Um ...”

“Kom, Pappa.” Sierra gee hom nie kans om te verduidelik nie. “Dis tyd vir perdjery.”

Jamie gryp in en vryf oor Sierra se hare. “Liefste, Pappa is moeg. Hoekom gaan speel jy nie 'n bietjie met Sarabelle in jou kamer nie?”

“Aaaa, Mamma, moet ek?” Sy klou aan Jake se kruk vas en leun met haar koppie teen sy been. “Ek wil hê Pappa moet my perdjie wees.”

Die gesingery in die motor, die perdjeryery ... daar is dosyne roetines wat hulle as gesin geken het, roetines waarvan Jamie Jake kon vertel het toe hy nog in die hospitaal was. Maar die dokter het haar afgeraai.

“Dis beter dat daardie dinge natuurlik gebeur, in die omgewing waarin dit die bekendste vir Jake is,” het hy vir haar gesê. “Sodoende sal hy dit dalk makliker onthou.”

Toe Sierra van perdjery praat, kyk Jake skouerophalend na Sierra voordat hy Jamie weer 'n desperate kyk gee. Sy knik vir hom, sak op haar knieë neer, en trek Sierra vir 'n oomblik teen haar vas. “Pappa wil ook perdjery, my liefie. Maar hy is nou baie moeg en moet 'n bietjie gaan slaap. Jy kan later met hom

praat, oukei?”

“Oukei.” Sierra frons dierbaar, maar glimlag amper weer dadelik toe sy opkyk na Jake. “Ek’s bly Pappa is by die huis. Ek het miljoene en miljoene na Pappa verlang.”

Toe Sierra effens onwillig boontoe gaan en na haar slaapkamer verdwyn, draai Jake met ’n vraende uitdrukking na Jamie. “Het ek *twee* dogters?”

“Twee dogters?” ’n Nuwe bekommernis begin in haar reeds onrustige hart uitkring. Ly Jake bo en behalwe die geheueverlies nog aan waanbeelde ook? “Wat laat jou so dink?”

Hy kyk boontoe in die rigting van Sierra se kamer. “Wie’s Sarabelle?”

Die lag begin diep in Jamie se keel borrel en sy probeer dit onderdruk. Sy mag nie vir Jake lag nie, maak nie saak hoe vergesog sy vrae is nie. Maar iets aan die hele situasie, om in die voorportaal van die huis te staan waarin hulle nog altyd gebly het en te bespiegel of Sierra se babapop dalk ’n tweede dogter is, is so lagwekkend snaaks dat Jamie haarself nie kan keer nie.

Uiteindelik lag sy so lekker dat sy teen die muur moet staan om regop te bly. Jake kyk na haar en toe Jamie lank genoeg ophou lag om asem te skep, leun hy vooroor, sy wenkbroue gelig. “Óf Sarabelle is nog ouliker as Sierra, óf ek het iets snaaks gesê.”

Jamie is nog uitasem en sy verwonder haar aan die gevoel. Wanneer laas het sy gelag? Sy klad haar ooghoeke. “Sarabelle is ... ’n pop. Sierra het haar al vandat sy twee is.”

Jake skud sy kop en lyk verlig. “Dis goed. Tussen perdziery en Jesus-liedjies, weet ek nie of ek vir ’n verrassingspakkie in die kamer daarbo sou kans sien nie.”

Jamie se lag vervaag en sy druk haar van die muur af weg. Sy wil nie vra nie; sy is eintlik nie veronderstel nie. Maar sy moet iets weet van wat Jake ervaar. “Onthou jy dit? Enigiets?”

Jake glimlag hartseer en skud sy kop stadig. “Dis asof ek nog nooit in my lewe hier was nie.”

Haar blik val vir ’n oomblik na die vloer en sy skep vinnig asem. Toe hulle oë weer ontmoet, plak sy ’n glimlag op haar gesig. “Ons het net tyd nodig.” Sy loop langs hom verby en wys hy moet volg. “Die gastekamer is hier deur.”

Hy gee twee tree agter haar aan, maar gaan staan dan. “Wag ’n bietjie.”

“Ja?” Jamie draai om en vir die eerste keer sedert hulle by die hospitaal weg is, kan sy hom van kop tot tone beskou. Daar is steeds verbande aan albei sy arms. Dit wat uitsteek, is vlekkerig en rooi, maar Jamie moet met die dokter saamstem. Dit lyk nie asof daar permanente letsels gaan wees nie. Wat sy gesig betref, is daar ’n stukkie gaas op albei wange en onder sy ken, maar andersins is daar net ’n dun lagie self – ’n middel wat Jamie elke paar uur aan sy gesig moet smeer.

Dis maklik om verby die beserings te kyk en Jake te sien soos hy twee weke gelede gelyk het. Lank en aantreklik, die man langs wie sy die afgelope paar jaar elke oggend wakker geword het.

Sy dwing haar terug na die hede. Jake staan ondersoekend na haar en kyk, 'n besorgde uitdrukking op sy gesig.

“Wat is fout?” Sy konsentreer daarop om hom nie as “liefling” of “my skat” aan te spreek nie. Niks wat hom ongemaklik sal laat voel nie.

Jake byt op sy onderlip en sy oë kyk soekend in hare. “Die gastekamer?”

Jamie is seker haar gesig het 'n skakering rooier geword, want 'n hittegloed beweeg van haar haarlyn na haar sleutelbeen. Haar oë val vir 'n oomblik na haar voete en toe kyk sy weer na hom. “Dis ... dis waar jy gaan bly totdat ... ”

Hy voltooi haar sin, sy skor stem sagter as voorheen. “Totdat ek onthou?”

“Ja.” Sy knik. “Tot dan.”

“Is dit oukei met jou?”

Sy voel diep geraak deur die deernisvolle uitdrukking wat op sy gesig verskyn. “Ja ... ” Hulle bevind hulle op onseker terrein en sy kyk hom in die oë, haar arms beskermend oor haar bors gevou. “Dit was dr. Cleary se voorstel.”

“O ... goed.”

En in daardie oomblik besef Jamie presies hoe ver hulle nog moet gaan. Want in die verlede sou Jake diep teleurgesteld gewees het as hy nie saam met Jamie in hulle bed kon slaap nie. Maar die uitdrukking wat nou op Jake se gesig is, is ver van teleurstelling af.

Dis verligting.

# Chapter TWENTY-FOUR

SEPTEMBER 27, 2001

He was attracted to her, and that had to be a good sign.

But still the dark-haired woman who was supposed to be his wife stirred in him no real feelings, no memories of intimacy. Not that it was his top priority. He had to figure out himself before he could work on restoring his relationship with Jamie. Because no matter how many waking hours he'd spent trying to remember, he still had no memory of who he was.

It was just before eight in the morning on Thursday, the beginning of his second full day in what was apparently his home. He had mixed feelings about staying in the guest room. It certainly wouldn't evoke any reminders of his past, but there was no question it took the pressure off him. Sharing a bed with the pretty brunette he was married to would've had its benefits, but physical intimacy didn't seem right or even natural. Not when his mind told him he'd only known Jamie a few weeks.

Jake looked around the room. It was small with high ceilings and beautifully ornate moldings. The walls were pale yellow trimmed in white and accented in deep blue around the windows. Jake guessed the house was at least sixty years old, and it held a sort of charm that helped him feel at ease. Someone had hung a set of shelves along one wall, and Jake studied them for a moment. Had *he* put them there, held the brackets in place and driven the screws into the wall for those very shelves?

If so, he couldn't remember doing it.

His eyes worked their way around the room, past the photos of Sierra and a series of older people, including the man who'd visited him in the hospital. His father. Jake stared hard at the picture, at the man's kind eyes and the proud way he stood in his uniform outside what Jake guessed was a New York fire station. But when he tried to remember anything about the man, about growing up with him or living life as his son, not a single

thought came to mind.

Jake closed his eyes. How could he not recognize either his wife or his father? The idea was only barely believable, but true all the same. He simply had no recollection about any of what had brought him to this place in life, this charming guest room.

He blinked and looked around the room once more, hoping for anything that might make him remember. Sliding forward a few inches, he twisted around and checked the walls adjacent to his bed. As he did, his breath caught in his throat. A mirror hung on the wall adjacent to where he'd been sleeping. A mirror! Why hadn't he thought of that before? He'd spent so much time trying to remember what lay inside himself, he'd forgotten entirely about the outside. What did he look like, anyway? He was tall obviously, fairly well built because he could see the muscles in his arms and legs. But what was his face like, his eyes and nose?

Maybe by looking at himself in the mirror, he'd have a sudden awakening, a memory jolt that would break up the logjam of details about his past. He glanced at the clock next to the bed. Jamie would come any minute to help him up, help him into a white robe he didn't recognize, and hand him his crutches. Then she'd lead him into the kitchen where she'd have breakfast ready.

But with an intensity stronger than his desire to breathe, Jake was suddenly desperate to see himself in the mirror. So far he hadn't gotten up without her help—the two times he'd tried, dizziness or nausea would wash over him, and he'd fall back on the bed. But this morning he felt stronger than before. He drew in a slow, deep breath and sat up, easing his legs out from beneath the covers and over the other side of the mattress, the side that had only a narrow pathway between the bed and the wall with the window.

Normally, Jamie helped him get out of the other side of the bed, the one closer to the door. No wonder he'd missed the mirror until now. A thought occurred to him as he caught his breath. Were Jamie and the doctor

trying to keep him from a mirror? If so, why?

Jake held his hands out in front of him and examined his skin. The bandaged burns took up a four-inch area on both his upper and lower arms, and what wasn't covered was red and tender. He ran his fingers along the tops of his thighs. His legs seemed to have handled the blast better than any other part of his body. Obviously because they'd been covered. The broken ankle still ached, and it would be another week before he could put weight on it. Eventually, though, his arms and legs would heal.

But what about his face?

He sucked in another huge breath and steeled himself to what he was about to see. Then he stood on his good leg, hopped to turn himself toward the mirror, and stared at the image that met him there. For a few beats he merely looked at the strange face, unblinking, his heart pounding within him.

No wonder Jamie and the doctor hadn't rushed him to a mirror sooner than this.

Every bit of exposed skin was dark red, as though he'd been the victim of a terrible sunburn. His lips were cracked and swollen, and gauze strips remained across most of his forehead and cheeks. If he'd been handsome at one time, it was hard to tell now.

Jake steadied himself against the wall and looked more closely at his reflection, this time at his eyes. They were clear and blue, but that was all. Beyond that there was nothing striking about them. No depth marked the center of them, no flicker of anything familiar. Almost as though the person who once lived inside him had packed his things and taken a permanent leave of absence.

He worked his jaw first one way, then the other, and brought his fingertips up to the bandaged areas. Dr. Cleary had said he wouldn't scar, that sometime in the next year it would be nearly impossible to tell he'd ever been burned. Jake doubted that very much. Not that he was terribly troubled by the fact. If he could remember who he was, he would've gladly

settled for a few unsightly scars on his face.

He believed them, of course, Jamie and the fire captain and the man they called his father. Everything they said seemed to line up. His name was Jake Bryan, and he was a firefighter with an apparent deep love for God and his family. That was respectable enough. At least he wasn't a criminal or a heathen, a maniac obsessed with greed or a Casanova carrying on with two women at once. But having the information about his identity on paper wasn't enough. He didn't want a resumé about his background. He needed to feel the facts in his heart, breathe them and speak them and own them in the core of his being. He'd only been home for two days, and so far he'd spent much of his time sleeping, hoping he might wake up and look out the window and everything about his past would suddenly and miraculously come rushing back. Instead, his only true peace came from the moments he spent with Sierra.

The child loved him unconditionally, unaware of even the slightest change in him since September 11. Jake still had no memories of the times he'd shared with his daughter, though her face remained familiar and so did her name. But in the past two days he had remembered something.

He had a daughter.

That much resonated deep in his soul and convinced him that he was where he was supposed to be, that somehow he'd become Jake Bryan again one of these days, and when it happened, everything would fall into place. He was sure with everything inside him, and not because of a doctor's diagnosis.

But because of his little girl.

In fact, the more he thought about her, the more familiar her name became. Sierra wasn't just a word he recognized, it was his daughter's name ... a name he'd known for years. Whatever he'd once shared with the little girl, the experience—at least in part—had left an indelible impression written on his heart.

And for now that would have to be enough.



If only he could remember that much about Jamie. She'd been wonderful, making sure his every need was met and careful not to expect anything of him. She'd greeted visitors from his church or fire station at the front door and graciously accepted meals or balloons or flower bouquets.

“Yes ... he's doing much better,” Jake would hear her say. “No ... not right now. He can't see anyone for a while. Not until he has his strength back.”

Then her voice would drop some, and she'd talk in hushed tones. Jake guessed those conversations were about the missing men, the people who must've been like family to him before the terrorist attacks. Hundreds of firefighter family members had to be devastated over the news, and though Jake had only recently had the strength to read the headlines, he knew enough to understand the enormity of the loss.

When Jake would ask her about the visitors, she'd give him a simple smile and say it wasn't important, just people reaching out to let him know they cared. She tossed no names at him, gave him no memory tests. Nothing that would lead to the disappointing realization that he remembered none of them.

In addition to protecting his privacy, Jamie brought him water and sliced fruit and sandwiches, and tended to his burns with an outpouring of love and patience that awed him. Every now and then they'd be talking about functional things—how his head felt, whether he wanted coffee or lunch—when he'd say something that made her laugh. At first he hadn't known what to make of that, but as the days passed, he found himself laughing along with her. Once when a funny moment had passed, she looked at him, her head cocked.

“Do you remember that?” She'd been sitting on the edge of the guest bed, careful to keep space between them.

“Remember what?” Her eyes had grown soft and thoughtful, and he'd been struck again by how difficult his memory loss had to be for her.

“Laughing. We used to laugh a lot, you and me.”

With everything in his limited understanding, Jake wanted to tell her yes, he remembered laughing with her and sharing happy moments. If he'd spent a lifetime with Jamie, much of it sharing humorous happy times, it only made sense that laughter would trigger his memories. But he could only give a sad shake of his head and tell her the truth. That laughing didn't feel even a little bit familiar.

The recent memory lifted, and Jake's head spun. The dizziness was back, and he dropped to the bed once more. He could hear Jamie working in the kitchen, and he didn't want to be exhausted before breakfast. He stretched out on the bed and remembered his first breakfast with her, just twenty-four hours earlier. Midway through the meal he'd thrown her a handful of tough questions, ones that had been working their way to the surface since he'd come out of his coma. Clearly, she'd been taken aback by the blunt manner in which he'd suddenly voiced his curiosity, but she'd been wonderful, answering him without breaking down, without letting her emotions get too close to the surface.

Sierra had been across the street at a neighbor's house, and he and Jamie had sat at a modest dining room table eating scrambled eggs and wheat toast. For the first five minutes their conversation had been the polite banter of two total strangers.

"Pass the salt, please." The idea that he'd known how he liked his food was another mystery. Why would his brain remember something like salt, yet shut out memories of his wife?

Jamie had done as he asked, careful not to make eye contact with him for more than a few seconds at a time. "I cooked the eggs too long."

"No." Jake took a bite and shook his head. "They're great. Perfect."

"Thanks."

Silence.

"The blisters on your forehead are down some."

"That's good." Another bite. "The ointment must be working."

They were five minutes into the meal when Jake set his fork down,

pushed his plate aside, and studied her. She took two more bites and then lifted her eyes to his. “You okay?”

That's when the questions came, one after another in no particular order. What mattered was that he held only a few pieces to the jigsaw puzzle of his past, while the tired-looking woman across from him held most of the rest. He couldn't wait another moment for at least some of the answers.

“How did we meet?” Jamie had blinked, and her fork froze in the air. From what he could read in her eyes, she loved him very much, maybe too much. He wasn't sure why he felt that way. A subtle desperation that she was careful not to voice. She set the fork on her plate, and her eyes fell.

Finally, after several seconds, she raised them once more to his. “We were kids, twelve years old.” She moved her plate aside and leaned forward. “Our families lived down the street from each other.”

“Here? On Staten Island?”

“On this street.” Her voice was quiet, tinged with something Jake guessed was sadness. “I grew up in this house.”

“When did I become a fireman?”

“Your dad was a fireman.” Jamie caught his gaze and held it. “You really don't remember that?”

Jake had looked down at the leftover eggs on his plate and shrugged. “I saw a picture of him in the guest room. He was in uniform, so I figured it was some kind of family thing.”

Jamie's mouth had opened a bit, but she said nothing.

“Who's my best friend?” His eyes met hers again and waited.

“At work?”

“Okay, yeah. At work.”

“Larry Henning.”

“He works at the same station, the place where I work?”

Jake had seen deep pain in Jamie's expression then. But she only sat a little straighter and gave a soft exhale. “Larry's missing, Jake. He was with

you that Tuesday at the World Trade Center.”

The news had hit Jake hard, not because he felt a connection to the missing man, but because at some point—whenever he began to remember again—he had so much pain yet to work through. After that his questions had stopped. The dialogue had tired him out, and the dark reality of the terrorist attacks and the changes they'd wrought in every aspect of their lives had been a wet blanket on his curiosity.

Jake yawned and let the memory go. He heard footsteps just outside the bedroom door, and Jamie opened it.

“Good morning.” Her smile didn't quite reach her eyes. “How long have you been awake?”

“Awhile.” He sat up, glad for the unfamiliar pajamas she'd given him. They gave him a sense of modesty, something he desperately wanted.

She entered the room and sat at the foot of his bed. “How're you feeling today?”

“Better. More energy.” He pointed to the mirror over his left shoulder. “I got my first look a few minutes ago.”

Alarm flickered in Jamie's eyes, but then it passed. “You're ... you're okay?”

“I'm burned pretty bad.” He worked his mouth open and closed a few times and gently touched his burns. “I can't believe the scars will ever go away.”

“Did you, you know, feel anything when you looked? Remember anything?”

“About myself? No ...” He uttered a sad sound that was more cry than laugh. “It was like looking at a magazine or television screen. Like the person staring back at me wasn't me at all.”

Jamie nodded. Resignation filled in the tiny lines near her eyes. “Breakfast's ready.”

“Thanks.”

“I made oatmeal.”

“Okay ... do I like oatmeal?” For some reason, Jake didn't think so.

“Yes.” A smile flickered on the corners of Jamie's mouth. “It's your favorite.”

“Oh.” Jake nodded a few quick times. “Right.”

This dry, factual interchange felt safer to Jake, more enjoyable and familiar than anything else Jamie might've chosen to talk about, and again he was grateful. Not once had she tried to pressure him in any way. She was doing everything in her power to make him feel comfortable. She helped him to his feet and eased his crutches along the sides of his body, under his arms. “Do you want me to help?”

She'd been walking alongside him, acting as a support so he wouldn't lose his balance. But this time he shook his head. “I think I can handle it.”

Jamie took the lead, and as Jake hobbled out of the room, he stopped short, his eyes glued to something he'd missed every other time he'd walked through this door. Down the hall a few feet, hanging on the wall, was a wedding portrait, a beautiful full-size photograph of a younger Jamie. But it wasn't her picture that made a layer of sweat bead up on his forehead.

It was his.

Because even with his burns there was no question that the man looking back at him from the portrait was the same one who'd looked back at him from the mirror that morning. Jake leaned hard on his crutches and took a few shaky steps toward the picture.

Jamie had caught the fact that he was no longer behind her, and she turned around. “What're you doing?”

Jake glanced at her for a moment, then nodded back at the portrait. “That's ... that's me.”

“Yes.” Jamie's eyes shone a little brighter as her gaze followed his. “Our wedding picture.”

“It looks familiar ... it's the first time anything has.”

Jamie uttered a quiet cry but quickly covered her mouth. She had to

be thinking the same thing he was—that it was a start. At the very least it was a start. Jake only hoped that the reason his photo looked familiar was because his memory was returning, and not because he'd seen himself in the mirror for the first time a few minutes earlier.

They made their way to the table and ate breakfast, the air between them somehow more relaxed than before. When they were done eating, Jamie turned to him and drew a slow breath. “I think you're ready, Jake.”

“For what?”

“Ever since we were married, you've kept a journal.” She crossed her arms, her words breathy and nervous. “Not every day, but often enough.” Her eyes found the ceiling, and for a moment, she wondered if she should change the conversation and make it wait for another time. Instead, she looked at him again, more resolutely this time. “Every morning you'd read your Bible, and most of the time you'd add something to your journal.” She hesitated. “I ... looked at both books the other day, after we first knew about your memory. There's so much there, Jake. Notes and highlighted sections in your Bible ... and the journal ... Jake, it's your life story. If you want to remember how to be Jake Bryan, everything you need is right there.”

Jake simply stared at her. A journal? And a Bible with notes and highlighted sections? It was exactly the type of information he needed. He struggled to his feet and reached for the crutches leaning against the table near his seat. A wild hope surged through him, hope greater than anything he'd felt since he woke up from the accident. “Where are they?”

“Upstairs.” She crossed her arms more tightly around herself. “I'll be busy down here all day and, well, I thought it'd be better if you read them upstairs on our ... on the bed up there. A place that was more familiar.” She angled her head. “Can you handle the climb?”

“Definitely.” Jake nodded and took a few wobbly steps toward her. “Lead the way.”

Jamie did, and as he followed her upstairs, Jake had the sense he

wasn't only finding his way back to a bedroom where he'd slept all those thousands of nights. He was finding his way back to yesterday, and every wonderful thing about it.

They entered the room, and Jake stopped at the doorway. A candle burned on an antique dresser, and the hint of vanilla mixed with the pungent smell of eucalyptus and dried flowers that hung on a wreath over the bed. A thick comforter with a delicate blue design was spread across the mattress, and the dark mahogany wood that made up the four-poster frame matched the dresser and four other pieces.

Everything about the room was warm and welcoming, a perfect haven for two people who loved each other. But as inviting as it was, Jake had to admit there was nothing familiar about it. Nothing at all.

"The books are over here." Jamie pointed as she walked toward the bed.

Her words were hurried, and Jake could sense that being in their bedroom together made her feel uncomfortable again. She stooped down and reached under the bed. As she did, her sweatshirt rose up, exposing the skin on her back. She was pretty; no question about it. Jake looked out the window so she wouldn't catch him staring. Something about seeing her bare back made him feel awkward. Jamie stood up, and he glanced back in her direction.

"Here." She had the books in her hand, and she crossed the room and handed them to him. "I'll be downstairs. Take as long as you want."

"Thanks, Jamie." He held her eyes a bit longer than usual. His words felt clumsy, especially with his raspy voice, but he had to try anyway. "About ... " He used his chin to gesture toward the bed. "About that. I'm sorry ... I ... I'm just not ready."

"That's okay." Her face turned a deep red, but she didn't look away. "We'll find our way back." She tapped the books in his hands. "That's the best place I can think of to start."

When she was gone, Jake set his crutches down against the dresser

and hopped around the edge. Then he climbed up and stretched out along the side of the bed where she'd found the books. He sat up against two oversized pillows and pulled the books onto his lap. Holy Bible, the first one read. The cover was made from worn leather, and at the bottom—nearly rubbed off from use—was his name: Jake Bryan.

He opened it and read the inscription inside. Then he made a quick glance at the pages. Jamie had been right on. There were highlighted sections of text nearly every few pages, and just as many scribbled notations in the margins. He stopped at one in the book of Hebrews.

The highlighted section read, *Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us keep our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith....* Jake's eyes scanned the page and found the tiny, handwritten words beside the verses. *I must always keep my eyes on God ... there's no other way to run the race of life, no other way to win.*

Twice more he read the words until the truth began to sink in. He was not just a religious guy, a guy who went to church and paid his taxes on time. He was in love with God, ruled by the Lord's truth, guided by His principles.

Jake could feel sections of the missing puzzle falling into place all at once.

His father—also clearly a man of God—had given Jake the Bible as a means of passing on his faith, and clearly Jake had caught the baton. Whatever else might not have felt tangible at the moment, the part that involved God was as real as his heartbeat. Tears gathered as he closed the cover of the Bible and held it to his chest. The crying surprised him, and he closed his eyes to keep the moment private between him and God.

*Help me, God ... how do I do this?*

He wanted to pray; in fact, the thoughts he had for God swelled within his heart. But something about praying didn't feel completely natural. Jake understood that. The amnesia stood like a fortress wall in the



way of his remembering exactly how to voice the words. But the thing that brought tears to his eyes was this: At least he remembered how. And that meant in addition to his memories of Sierra, he also had memories of God. Since that was true, it would only be a matter of time before he would remember Jamie and his father and everything about being a New York City firefighter.

A slow sigh eased between his lips. The words he wanted to say to God grew and built within him until speaking them in the silent places of his soul was the most natural thing he could ever remember doing.

*Lord, it feels so good to find You again, to read the notes in my Bible and know that here, with You, is the place where I've always found my strength.* He paused, and a tear squeezed its way from the corner of his eye. He let it go. *I'm a firefighter, God, so I know I've been in some tough places before. I was in a tough place that Tuesday morning at the World Trade Center. But this ... this not knowing the people I love ... this is the hardest thing I can imagine.* He sniffed. *So I need Your strength again, God ... I need to spend time with You and Your words and pray that You'll hold me up, like You've obviously done all my life.* He rubbed his thumb over the leather of his Bible. Strength unlike any he'd felt since he'd been injured washed over him, and he tightened his grip on the old book. *Thank You for letting me live ... thank You for Jamie and Sierra and for bringing me safely to this place. Now ... please, God ... if You could just help me find my way home.*

Jake spent the rest of that day and most of the next two weeks praying and poring over the highlighted sections of his Bible and the hundreds of entries in his journal. Jamie had been right about that too. The things he'd written gave him an intimate understanding of his passion for God and Jamie and Sierra. The entries spoke of his fear that Jamie might never share his faith and her fears that something might happen to him on the job. They told of happy times and family vacations, and they detailed his hopes for Sierra's future. They talked of the tougher calls he'd taken as a firefighter

and the fun times he and Larry Henning had shared.

Never mind that his head still hurt when he read, the material was both fascinating and gripping, filling in the missing pieces of his past until at the end of those two weeks he didn't merely know everything there was to know about Jake Bryan. No, it was more than that, a feeling that ran much deeper.

Because of the two books, he was actually becoming him.

## Vier-en-twintig

27 September 2001

Hy is aangetrokke tot haar, en dit moet 'n goeie teken wees.

Maar die donkerkopvrou wat veronderstel is om sy vrou te wees, wek steeds nie enige werklike gevoelens of herinneringe aan intimiteit by hom nie. Nie dat dit sy hoogste prioriteit is nie. Hy moet homself eers weer ontdek voordat hy aan sy verhouding met Jamie kan werk. Want maak nie saak hoeveel ure hy daaraan wy om te probeer onthou nie, hy het steeds geen herinnering aan wie hy is nie.

Dis net voor agt Donderdagoggend, die begin van sy tweede dag in die huis waar hy klaarblyklik amper tien jaar lank gewoon het. Hy het gemengde gevoelens oor die gastekamer. Dit sal definitief nie enige herinneringe aan sy verlede terugbring nie, maar dit haal ongetwyfeld die druk van hom af. Om in dieselfde bed as die mooi brunet te slaap met wie hy getroud is, sal sekere voordele inhou, maar fisiese intimiteit voel in hierdie stadium nie reg of selfs natuurlik nie. Nie terwyl sy verstand vir hom sê dat hy Jamie nog net 'n paar weke lank ken nie.

Jake kyk om hom rond in die kamer. Dis klein met 'n hoë plafon en lieflike lyswerk. Die mure is 'n sagte geel geverf en is met 'n diep blou rondom die vensters geaksentueer. Jake skat die huis omtrent sestig jaar oud, en dit beskik oor 'n sekere bekoring wat hom help om op sy gemak te voel. Iemand het 'n stel rakke teen die een muur opgesit, en Jake bestudeer dit vir 'n oomblik. Is dit sý handewerk; het hý rakke gebou en teen die muur vasgeskroef?

Indien wel, kan hy nie onthou hy het dit gedoen nie.

Sy oë beweeg stelselmatig deur die vertrek, verby die foto's van Sierra en 'n paar ouer mense, insluitend die man wat hom in die hospitaal kom besoek het. Sy pa. Jake kyk stip na die foto, na die man se sagte oë en sy trotse houding in sy uniform voor 'n gebou wat seker 'n brandweerstasie in New York is. Maar wanneer hy enigiets van die man probeer onthou, van sy kinderjare as die man se seun, is daar nie 'n enkele herinnering wat by hom opkom nie.

Jake maak sy oë toe. Hoe is dit moontlik dat hy nie sy vrou of sy pa onthou

nie? Dis amper ondenkbaar, maar dis waar. Hy het eenvoudig geen herinnering aan hoe hy op hierdie plek in sy lewe, in hierdie bekoorlike gastekamer beland het nie.

Hy kyk weer om hom rond in die hoop dat iets hom sal laat onthou. Hy skuif 'n entjie vorentoe om die mure aan weerskante van hom te bestudeer. Toe snak hy na sy asem. Daar hang 'n spieël teen die muur langs sy bed. 'n Spieël! Hoekom het hy nie vroeër daaraan gedink nie? Vandat hy wakker is, werk hy so hard daaraan om te onthou wat binne hom lê dat hy heeltemal van die buitekant vergeet het. Hoe lyk hy? Hy weet hy is lank, en hy is taamlik goed gebou, want hy kan die spiere in sy arms en bene sien. Maar hoe lyk sy gesig, sy oë en neus?

Die aanskoue van sy eie gesig kan moontlik 'n soort innerlike ontwaking tot gevolg hê, 'n skielike aktivering van herinneringe wat die besonderhede oor sy verlede sal ontsluit. Hy kyk na die wekker langs sy bed. Jamie gaan nou enige oomblik inkom om te kyk of hy wakker is, om hom 'n wit kamerjas te help aantrek wat hy nie ken nie, en sy krukke aan te gee. Dan sal sy hom kombuis toe neem waar sy onthou op hom wag.

Maar daar is in Jake 'n skielike intense desperaatheid om homself in die spieël te sien. Tot dusver het hy nie sonder haar hulp uit die bed gekom nie – die twee kere wat hy probeer het, het hy erg lighoofdig en naar gevoel, en het hy weer op die bed gaan sit. Maar vanoggend voel hy sterker as gister. Hy trek sy asem stadig in terwyl hy regop sit en laat sak sy bene versigtig oor die rand van die bed. Daar is net 'n paar treë tussen die bed en die muur met die spieël. Normaalweg help Jamie hom om aan die ander kant van die bed af te klim, die kant naaste aan die deur. Dis geen wonder hy het die spieël nog altyd misgekyk nie. Hy dink skielik aan iets en trek sy asem skerp in. Wil Jamie en die dokter keer dat hy by 'n spieël uitkom? Indien wel, hoekom?

Jake hou sy hande voor hom op en bestudeer sy vel. Die oorblywende verbande bedek tien sentimeter van sy bo- en voorarms, en dit wat uitsteek, is rooi en teer. Hy streel oor sy bobene. Oënskynlik het sy bene die ontploffing beter as enige ander deel van sy liggaam hanteer. Vanselfsprekend is hulle deur sy uniform beskerm. Die gebreekte enkel is nog seer, en hy sal eers oor 'n week daarop kan begin trap. Tog sal sy arms en bene uiteindelik genees.

Maar wat van sy gesig?

Hy trek sy asem weer diep in en staal hom vir wat hy gaan sien. Toe plaas hy sy gewig op sy gesonde been, spring in die rondte totdat die spieël voor hom is en kyk na die beeld wat hom daar begroet. Vir 'n paar oomblikke kyk hy net na die vreemde gesig terwyl sy hart onstuimig begin klop.

Geen wonder Jamie en die dokter wou hom nie vroeër by 'n spieël toelaat nie. Elke stukkie oop vel is donkerrooi, asof hy die slagoffer van 'n vreeslike sonbrand is. Sy lippe is gebars en opgeswel, en daar is stroke gaas oor die grootste deel van sy voorkop en wange. As hy in die een of ander stadium aantreklik was, is hy dit definitief nie meer nie.

Jake stut hom teen die muur en bekijk hom van naderby, hierdie keer sy oë.

Hulle is 'n skoon blou, maar dis al. Verder is daar niks treffends aan hulle nie. Hy bemerk geen diepte, geen flikkering van enigiets bekends nie. Amper asof die persoon wat eens in hom gelewe het, sy goed gepak en permanent verhuis het.

Hy beweeg sy kakebeen heen en weer en raak met sy vingerpunte aan die verbinde areas. Dr. Cleary het gesê hy sal nie littekens oorhou nie, en dit sal oor 'n paar maande amper onmoontlik wees om te sien dat hy ooit gebrand het. Jake twyfel baie sterk daaraan. Nie dat dit hom verskriklik baie ontstel nie. As hy maar net kan onthou wie hy is, sal hy geen besware teen 'n paar onaansienlike letsels op sy gesig hê nie.

Natuurlik glo hy hulle, Jamie en die brandweerkaptein en die man wat hulle sy pa noem. Alles wat hulle sê, maak sin. Sy naam is Jake Bryan en hy is 'n brandweerman met 'n oënskynlike groot liefde vir God en sy gesin. Dis alles heel respektabel. Ten minste is hy nie 'n misdadiger of 'n heiden, 'n maniak wat geld najaag of 'n Casanova wat hom met meer as een vrou gelyk ophou nie. Maar om die inligting oor sy identiteit op skrif te hê, is nie genoeg nie. Hy wil nie 'n resumé oor sy agtergrond hê nie. Hy moet die feite in sy hart ervaar, dit praat en uitleef en in die kern van sy menswees ken. Hy is nog net twee dae by die huis, en tot dusver slaap hy baie van die tyd. As hy maar net kan wakker word en deur die venster kyk en voel hoe sy verlede skielik en wonderbaarlik na hom toe terugkom. Die enigste ware vrede kom egter van die oomblikke wat hy by Sierra deurbring.

Die dogtertjie het hom onvoorwaardelik lief, onbewus van die veranderinge wat hy sedert 11 September ondergaan het. Al het Jake steeds geen herinneringe aan die oomblikke wat hy met sy dogtertjie gedeel het nie, bly haar gesiggie en naam bekend. Gedurende die afgelope twee dae het hy egter iets onthou.

Hy het 'n dogter.

Dit resoneer diep in sy siel en oortuig hom daarvan dat hy op die plek is waar hy veronderstel is om te wees, dat hy een van die dae weer Jake Bryan sal word, en wanneer dit gebeur, sal alles in plek val. Hy glo dit met sy hele hart, en nie op grond van 'n dokter se diagnose nie.

Maar op grond van sy klein dogtertjie.

Trouens, hoe meer hy aan haar dink, hoe meer bekend word haar naam. Sierra is nie net 'n woord wat hy herken nie, dis sy dogtertjie se naam ... 'n naam wat hy al jare ken. Wat hy ook al met hierdie klein dogtertjie gedeel het, die ervaring het – ten minste gedeeltelik – 'n onuitwisbare indruk op sy hart gelaat.

En vir eers sal dit genoeg moet wees.

As hy maar net iets van Jamie kan onthou. Sy is wonderlik vir hom en maak seker daar word in al sy behoeftes voorsien sonder om enigiets van hom terug te verwag. Sy ontvang besoekers van sy kerk of die brandweerstasie by die voordeur en bedank hulle vir etes of ballonne of ruikers.

“Ja ... dit gaan al baie beter,” sal Jake haar hoor sê. “Nee ... nie op die oomblik

nie. Hy kan nie nou al besoekers ontvang nie. Nie voordat hy weer sterk genoeg is nie.”

Dan praat sy verder in ’n gedempte stem. Jake neem aan hulle gesels dan oor die vermiste mans, die mense wat voor die terroriste-aanval soos sy familie was. Die gesinne van honderde brandweermanne is seker verpletter oor die nuus, en alhoewel Jake eers nou die dag sterk genoeg gevoel het om die koerantopskrifte te lees, weet hy genoeg om die enorme omvang van die verlies te besef.

Wanneer Jake haar oor die besoekers uitvra, glimlag sy net en sê dat dit nie belangrik was nie, net mense wat kom inloer om te wys dat hulle omgee. Sy noem geen name om sy geheue te toets nie. Niks wat tot die teleurstellende besef sal lei dat hy niemand van hulle onthou nie.

Buiten dat sy sy privaatheid beskerm, bring Jamie vir hom water en vrugteslaai en toebroodjies. Sy versorg sy wonde met ’n liefde en geduld wat hom verstom. Elke dan en wan wanneer hulle oor funksionele goed gesels – oor hoe sy kop voel, of hy koffie of iets te ete wil hê – sal hy iets sê wat haar laat lag. Aanvanklik het hy nie geweet hoe om dit te hanteer nie, maar met verloop van tyd het hy homself betrap dat hy saam met haar lag. Na afloop van een so ’n insident het sy skewekop na hom gekyk.

“Onthou jy dit?” Sy het doelbewus ’n entjie van hom af op die onderpunt van sy bed gesit.

“Onthou ek wat?” Haar oë was sag en nadenkend, en hy het weer besef hoe moeilik sy geheueverlies vir haar moes wees.

“Die lag. Ek en jy het baie gelag.”

Jake wou met sy hele wese sê dat hy hulle saamlag onthou, die gelukkige oomblikke wat hulle gedeel het. As hy ’n leeftyd met Jamie gedeel het en baie daarvan humoristiese, gelukkige tye was, maak dit net sin dat sy geheue deur sulke oomblikke geaktiveer sou word. Maar al wat hy kon doen, was om sy kop hartseer te skud en eerlik met haar te wees. Die lag voel nie eens vaagweg bekend nie.

Die onlangse herinnering vervaag en Jake se kop draai. Die lighoofdigheid is terug en hy sak weer op die bed neer. Hy kan Jamie in die kombuis hoor en hy wil nie voor ontbyt al uitgeput wees nie. Hy gaan lê weer en onthou sy eerste ontbyt saam met haar, net vier-en-twintig uur gelede. Halfpad deur die ete het hy haar ’n klomp moeilike vrae gevra wat sedert hy uit sy koma gekom het, stadig maar seker na die oppervlak gekom het. Sy was duidelik ontsenu oor die reguit manier waarop hy haar uitgevra het, maar sy was wonderlik en het hom geantwoord sonder om emosioneel te raak of haar gevoelens te laat blyk. Sierra het by die bure gespeel en hy en Jamie het roereier en roosterbrood by die eetkamertafel geëet. Vir die eerste vyf minute was hulle gesprek dié van twee beleefde vreemdelinge.

“Gee asseblief die sout aan.” Die idee dat hy weet hoe hy van sy kos hou, is nog ’n geheimenis. Hoekom sal sy brein iets soos sout onthou, maar herinneringe aan sy vrou onderdruk?

Jamie het gedoen wat hy vra, waaksaam om nie vir meer as 'n paar sekondes op 'n slag oogkontak te maak nie. “Ek het die eiers te lank op die stoof gehad.”

“Nee.” Jake het 'n hap geneem en sy kop geskud. “Dis heerlik. Net reg.”

“Dankie.”

Stilte.

“Die blase op jou voorkop is besig om gesond te word.”

“Dis goed.” Nog 'n hap. “Ek's bly die salf werk.”

Hulle het vyf minute geëet toe Jake sy vurk neersit, sy bord opsy skuif en ondersoekend na haar kyk. Sy het nog twee happies geneem en toe na hom gekyk. “Is jy oukei?”

Dis toe dat die vrae die een ná die ander, sonder 'n spesifieke volgorde, gekom het. Hy het immers net 'n paar van die legkaartstukkies van sy verlede gehad terwyl die uitgeputte vrou oorkant hom die meeste by haar gehad het. Hy kon nie 'n oomblik langer wag vir ten minste 'n paar antwoorde nie.

“Hoe het ons ontmoet?” Jamie het haar oë geknip en haar vurk het in die lug bly hang. Uit wat hy in haar oë kon lees, is sy baie lief vir hom, miskien te veel. Hy is nie seker waarom hy so voel nie. 'n Subtiele desperaatheid wat sy versigtig is om nie te verwoord nie. Sy het die vurk in haar bord neergesit en afgekyk.

Na 'n paar sekondes het sy uiteindelik in sy oë gekyk. “Ons was kinders, twaalf jaar oud.” Sy het haar bord eenkant toe gestoot en vooroor geleun. “Ons het in dieselfde straat gebly.”

“Hier? Op Staten Island?”

“In hierdie straat.” Haar stem was sag en Jake het hom verbeel hy hoor 'n tikkie hartseer. “Ek het in hierdie huis grootgeword.”

“Wanneer het ek 'n brandweerman geword?”

“Jou pa was 'n brandweerman.” Jamie het sy oë gevange gehou. “Onthou jy regtig nie?”

Jake moes afkyk na die oorskieteier op sy bord en het sy skouers opgehaal. “Ek het 'n foto van hom in die gastekamer gesien. Hy was in sy uniform, toe raai ek maar dis 'n familieding.”

Jamie se mond het effens oopgegaan, maar sy het niks gesê nie.

“Wie is my beste vriend?” Hy het weer in haar oë gekyk en gewag.

“By die werk?”

“Oukei, ja. By die werk.”

“Larry Henning.”

“Werk hy by dieselfde stasie, die plek waar ek gewerk het?”

Jake het die pyn in Jamie se uitdrukking gesien. Maar sy het net haar skouers reguit gemaak en haar asem saggies uitgeblaas. “Larry word vermis, Jake. Hy was daardie Dinsdag saam met jou by die World Trade Center.”

Die nuus tref hom swaar, nie omdat hy 'n band met die vermiste man ervaar nie, maar omdat hy op die een of ander tydstop – wanneer hy weer begin onthou – soveel pyn sal moet verwerk. Hy het haar nie verder uitgevra nie.

Die gesprek het hom moeg gemaak en die donker werklikheid van die terroriste-aanvalle en die manier waarop dit hulle lewe omvergewerp het, was soos 'n nat vadoek oor sy nuuskierigheid.

Jake gaap en kom terug na die hede. Hy hoor naderende voetstappe in die gang en toe maak Jamie sy deur oop.

“Goeiemôre.” Haar glimlag kom nie heeltemal tot by haar oë nie. “Hoe lank is jy al wakker?”

“'n Rukkie.” Hy sit regop, dankbaar vir die onbekende pajamas wat sy vir hom gegee het. Dit gee hom 'n welkome gevoel van betaamlikheid.

Sy kom in en gaan sit op die voetenent van sy bed. “Hoe voel jy vanoggend?”

“Beter. Sterker.” Hy wys na die spieël oor sy linkerskouer. “Ek het sopas my eerste kykie gekry.”

Vir net 'n vlietende oomblik lyk Jamie verskrik. “Is ... is jy oukei?”

“Ek het maar sleg gebrand.” Hy maak sy mond 'n paar maal oop en toe en raak versigtig aan sy gesig. “Ek kan nie dink dat die letsels ooit sal weggaan nie.”

“Het jy enigiets gevoel toe jy gekyk het? Enigiets onthou?”

“Van myself? Nee ... ” Hy probeer 'n laggie gee. “Dit was soos om na 'n tydskrif of televisieskerm te kyk. Asof die persoon wat na my terugkyk, glad nie ek is nie.”

Jamie knik. Daar is 'n verslaenheid in die fyn lyntjies om haar oë. “Jou ontbyt is gereed.”

“Dankie.”

“Ek het hawermout gemaak.”

“Oukei ... hou ek van hawermout?” Om die een of ander rede dink Jake nie so nie.

“Ja.” 'n Glimlag pluk aan Jamie se mond. “Dis jou gunstelingontbyt.”

“O.” Jake knik 'n paar keer vinnig. “Goed.”

Hierdie droë, feitlike gesprek voel veiliger vir Jake; dis meer aangenaam en meer bekend as enigiets anders waaroor Jamie sou wou praat, en hy is dankbaar. Sy het nog nie een keer probeer om enige druk op hom te plaas nie. Sy doen alles in haar vermoë om hom op sy gemak te stel. Sy ondersteun hom toe hy opstaan en help hom met sy krukke. “Wil jy hê ek moet saam met jou loop?”

Tot nou toe het sy langs hom geloop vir ingeval hy sy balans verloor. Maar hierdie keer skud hy sy kop. “Ek dink ek sal regkom.”

Jamie loop vooruit, maar toe Jake hinkend by die kamer uitkom, steek hy vas, sy oë vasgenaël op iets wat hy nog elke keer gemis het toe hy by die deur uitgekom het. Teen die gangmuur, 'n entjie van hom af, is 'n troufoto, 'n lieflike volgrootte foto van 'n jonger Jamie. Maar dis nie haar beeld wat die sweet op sy voorkop laat uitslaan nie.

Dis syne.

Want ondanks sy brandwonde, bestaan daar geen onsekerheid dat die man op die foto voor hom dieselfde een is wat vroeër uit die spieël na hom gekyk het

nie. Jake leun swaar op sy krukke en hobbel 'n paar treë nader aan die foto. Jamie het opgemerk dat hy nie meer agter haar is nie, en sy draai om. “Wat is dit?”

Jake kyk vir 'n oomblik na haar, knik dan na die foto teen die muur. “Dis ... dis ek.”

“Ja.” Jamie se oë versag toe haar blik syne volg. “Ons troufoto.”

“Dit lyk bekend ... dis die eerste keer dat iets bekend lyk.”

Jamie uiter 'n sagte kreet, maar slaan haar hand oor haar mond. Sy dink waarskynlik dieselfde as hy – dat dit 'n begin is. Op sy allerminste is dit 'n begin. Jake kan maar net hoop dat sy foto bekend lyk omdat sy geheue begin terugkom, en nie omdat hy homself 'n paar minute vroeër in die spieël gesien het nie.

Hulle gaan sit aan tafel en eet ontbyt, die atmosfeer tussen hulle meer ontspanne as tevore. Toe hulle klaar is, draai Jamie na hom en trek haar asem stadig in. “Ek dink jy is gereed, Jake.”

“Waarvoor?”

“Voor jou ongeluk het jy dagboek gehou.” Sy vou haar arms, haar woorde asemrig en senuweeagtig. “Nie elke dag nie, maar dikwels.” Haar oë beweeg na die plafon en vir 'n oomblik lyk dit asof sy die gesprek wil uitstel, maar toe kyk sy weer na hom, hierdie keer meer vasberade. “Jy het elke oggend Bybel geles en die meeste van die tyd iets in jou dagboek geskryf.” Sy aarsel. “Ek ... ek het nou die dag vir die eerste keer na albei boeke gekyk, toe ons van jou geheueverlies uitgevind het. Jy sal soveel daar ontdek, Jake. Aantekeninge en onderstreepte gedeeltes in jou Bybel ... en die dagboek ... Jake, dis jou lewensverhaal. As jy wil onthou hoe om Jake Bryan te wees, sal jy alles wat jy nodig het, daar kry.”

Jake staar na haar. 'n Dagboek? En 'n Bybel met aantekeninge en onderstreepte gedeeltes? Dis presies die soort inligting wat hy nodig het. Hy kom sukkelend orent en neem sy krukke wat hy langs hom teen die tafel staangemaak het. 'n Wilde hoop vlam in hom op, groter as enigiets wat hy sedert die ongeluk ervaar het. “Waar is dit?”

“Bo.” Sy vou haar arms stywer om haarself. “Ek gaan heeldag hier onder besig wees en, wel, ek het gedink dit sal beter wees as jy dit in ons kamer ... die kamer daarbo lees. In 'n meer bekende omgewing.” Sy hou haar kop skeef. “Sal jy regkom met die trappe?”

“Definitief.” Jake knik en gee 'n paar wankelrige treë na haar toe. “Ek's agter jou.”

Jamie loop vooruit en terwyl hy haar boontoe volg, kry Jake die gevoel hy is nie net op pad na die kamer waar hy duisende nagte geslaap het nie. Hy is ook op pad na gister, en alles wat wonderlik daaraan was.

Hulle bereik die kamer en Jake gaan staan in die deur. 'n Kers brand op 'n antieke spieëlkas, en 'n sweempie vanielje meng met die sterker geur van 'n bloekom- en gedroogde blommekrans bokant die bed. Daar is 'n sagte duvet met 'n delikate blou ontwerp oor die bed, en die donker mahoniehout van die



bed pas by die spieëltafel en ander meubels.

Alles in die kamer is knus en uitnodigend, 'n ideale toevlug vir twee mense wat mekaar liefhet. Maar hoe gesellig die vertrek ook al is, moet Jake erken dat niks vir hom bekend lyk nie. Hoegenaamd niks nie.

“Hier is die boeke,” wys Jamie toe sy na die bed toe loop.

Haar woorde is gejaagd en Jake kan aanvoel om saam met hom in die kamer te wees, laat haar weer ongemaklik voel. Toe sy buk om die boeke onder die bed uit te haal, skuif haar sweetpaktop 'n entjie op sodat 'n stukkie van haar rug sigbaar is. Sy is mooi, dis vir seker. Jake kyk deur die venster sodat sy hom nie betrap dat hy staar nie. Iets aan haar kaal rug laat hom ongemaklik voel. Jamie staan op en hy kyk weer terug in haar rigting.

“Hierso.” Sy loop deur die kamer en gee die boeke vir hom. “Ek sal onder besig wees. Neem jou tyd.”

“Dankie, Jamie.” Hy hou haar oë 'n bietjie langer as gewoonlik in syne. Sy woorde voel lomp, veral so in sy skor stem, maar hy moet probeer. “Ek ...” Hy gebruik sy ken om na die bed te wys. “Ek’s jammer ... Ek ... ek is nog net nie gereed nie.”

“Dis oukei.” 'n Dieprooi blos versprei oor haar gesig, maar sy kyk nie weg nie. “Dit sal kom.” Sy tik op die boeke in sy hande. “Dis die beste plek waaraan ek kan dink om te begin.”

Toe sy uit is en Jake sy krukke teen die spieëltafel neergesit het, spring hy eenbeen tot by die bed. Hy gaan sit met sy rug teen groot kussings en sy bene voor hom uitgestrek. Toe sit hy die twee boeke op sy skoot neer. Die boonste een is die Bybel. Die omslag is van verweerde leer, en onderaan die voorblad – al dof van baie gebruik – staan sy naam: Jake Bryan.

Hy maak die boek oop en lees sy pa se inskrywing. Dan waaier hy deur die bladsye. Jamie is reg. Op elke paar bladsy is daar onderstreepte gedeeltes en amper net soveel aantekeninge in die kantlyne. Sy oë val op een in die boek Hebreërs.

*Die onderstreepte gedeelte lees: Terwyl ons dan so 'n groot skare geloofsgetuies rondom ons het, laat ons elke las van ons afgooi, ook die sonde wat ons so maklik verstriek, en laat ons die wedloop wat vir ons voorlê, met volharding hardloop, die oog gevestig op Jesus, die Begin en Voleinder van die geloof ... Jake se oë beweeg na die klein handgeskrewe woorde langs die verse. Ek moet my oë altyd op die Here hou ... dis die enigste manier om die wedloop te voltooi, die enigste manier om te wen.*

Hy lees die woorde nog twee maal totdat die woorde begin insink. Hy was nie net 'n godsdienstige ou wat kerk toe gegaan en sy belasting betyds betaal het nie. Hy het God liefgehad, volgens sy waarheid gelewe en hom deur die Here se beginsels laat rig.

Jake kan voel hoe 'n paar ontbrekende stukke van die legkaart plotseling in plek val. Sy pa – ook duidelik 'n man van God – het hierdie Bybel vir Jake gegee as 'n manier om sy geloof oor te dra, en dis duidelik dat Jake in sy pa se

voetspore volg. Ten spyte van alles wat in hierdie oomblik nie bekend voel nie, is die pad wat hy met God geloop het, so werklik soos sy hartklop. Sy oë raak vol trane toe hy die Bybel toemaak en dit teen sy bors vashou. Hy is verbaas oor sy trane en maak sy oë toe om die oomblik tussen hom en God privaat te hou.

*Help my, Here ... hoe maak ek nou?*

Hy wil bid; trouens, die gedagtes wat hy vir God het, borrel in hom op. Maar iets daaraan voel nie heeltemal natuurlik nie. Hy verstaan dit. Die amnesie maak dat hy nie presies kan onthou hoe om aan sy woorde uiting te gee nie. Tog bring die feit dat hy ten minste onthou hoe om te bid trane na sy oë. Dit beteken buiten sy herinneringe aan Sierra, het hy ook herinneringe aan God. Aangesien dit waar is, sal dit net 'n kwessie van tyd wees voordat hy Jamie en sy pa en alles omtrent sy werk as brandweerman onthou.

'n Swaar sug ontsnap oor sy lippe. Dit wat hy vir God wil sê, stu in hom op totdat dit na die natuurlikste ding op aarde voel om daaraan uiting te gee.

*Here, dit voel so goed om U weer te vind, om die aantekeninge in my Bybel te lees en te weet dat ek hier by U nog altyd my krag gevind het. Hy bly stil en 'n traan syfer uit die hoek van sy oog, maar hy gee nie om nie. Ek's 'n brandweerman, Here, en ek weet ek was al in moeilike situasies. Ek was daardie Dinsdagoggend by die World Trade Center op 'n verskriklike plek. Maar dít ... om nie my geliefdes te ken nie ... ek kan nie aan iets ergers dink nie. Hy snuif. Ek het u krag nodig, Here ... Ek moet tyd in die teenwoordigheid van U en u Woord bestee, en ek bid dat U my sal regop hou, soos U klaarblyklik nog altyd gedoen het. Hy streel met sy duim oor die leeromslag van sy Bybel. Hy raak bewus van 'n krag, groter as enigiets wat hy sedert sy ongeluk ervaar het, en hy hou die ou boek stywer vas. Dankie dat U my lewe bewaar het ... dankie vir Jamie en Sierra en dat U my veilig hierheen gebring het. Asseblief God, as U my nou net sal help om my weg huis toe te vind.*

Jake gebruik die res van die dag en die volgende twee weke om te bid en hom in die onderstreepte gedeeltes in sy Bybel te verdiep en die honderde inskrywings in sy dagboek te bestudeer. Sy inskrywings gee hom 'n intieme begrip van sy passie vir God en Jamie en Sierra. Hy lees van sy vrees dat Jamie nooit sy geloof sal deel nie en haar vrees dat hy iets by die werk gaan oorkom. Hy lees van gelukkige tye en gesinsvakansies, en hulle hoop vir Sierra se toekoms. Hy lees van die gevaarliker brande waarheen hulle uitgeroep is en die pret wat hy en Larry gehad het.

Dit maak nie saak dat sy kop nog seer is wanneer hy lees nie; die inhoud is fassinerend en boeiend. Uiteindelik word die oop spasies in sy verlede ingevul totdat hy twee weke later nie net alles weet wat daar oor Jake Bryan te wete is nie. Nee, dis meer, iets wat hy op 'n veel dieper vlak ervaar.

Danksy die Bybel en die dagboek is hy uiteindelik besig om Jake te word.

# Chapter TWENTY-FIVE

OCTOBER 13, 2001

Bit by precious bit, Jamie could feel her husband returning.

The day after she'd led him to his Bible and journal, Jake had taken them down to the guest room, and from that point he'd been lost in the information. All of which was a wonderful thing, because when the two of them were together with Sierra over dinner or breakfast, his conversations and quiet reflections sounded more like Jake Bryan all the time.

It was late Saturday afternoon, nearly three weeks after he'd come home from the hospital, and she was tired of staying away from him. Even if he was busy reading, she wanted to be near him, talk to him. See if his memory was bursting through the fog in his brain. She walked from the kitchen to the guest room and gave the door a quiet push open. He was reading the Bible, too caught up even to notice her, and so she leaned against the doorframe and studied him. This reading was all he'd done, really, the thing that had taken up most of his time since she'd showed him the books on his second day at home.

Jamie had been in touch with Dr. Cleary and explained Jake's fascination with the material. "Should I be worried about him? I mean he'd rather read all day than get on with life outside the guest room."

"That's perfect. No alarm for concern, Jamie. It's just the kind of thing that'll help him remember. He'll let you know when he's ready to start living again."

And so for two weeks, Jamie had done nothing but tend to his burns and prepare his meals while he buried himself in the books. The church friends and firefighter visitors had continued to stop by, wanting to wish Jake well and offer whatever help they could in his recovery. By now the surviving men he'd worked with knew about his memory loss.

But so far, Jamie hadn't allowed them in. She'd greet them at the door, hug them, talk with them, tell them the latest about Jake. But she intended

to stick as closely as possible to Dr. Cleary's orders, and he'd made it clear that visitors would only slow the healing process of Jake's brain. Jake needed a simple life, as close as possible to the one he'd had before he was hurt.

Once that felt familiar to him, he could see the guys from the station. Besides, Jamie felt terrible around Jake's buddies, because none of them wanted to talk with her about Larry Henning or the others who'd been lost the morning of the attacks. Surely they talked among themselves about the emptiness, the enormous losses of so many great men who had risked their lives to try to save others. But around her they said very little.

She didn't want to talk about the missing men either; in fact, she still hadn't talked with Sue since September 11. The few times Jamie had called, Sue had been sleeping or talking with family. Certainly, the depth of the tragedy was setting in throughout the department, and Jamie was content to be shielded from most of it.

The efforts at Ground Zero were no longer being called a rescue. They were a recovery operation, and that could only mean one thing. Larry was dead. At some point Jamie and especially Jake would have to deal with the loss, but not yet. Not until her husband could figure out who he was. And until then, Jamie was more than willing to focus all her energy on Jake and, in the process, delay her own grieving, as well.

She studied him from the doorway, and he still didn't see her. He was too caught up in a world he was desperate to find again. His burns were healing. Only a few spots still required bandaging—an area on his forehead and his left cheek, and spots on both his forearms. His skin was red and blotchy, and his voice was still not back to normal, but he was looking more like himself all the time. He was finished with the crutches too, and though the boot cast remained, he could get around without assistance. She'd talked to Dr. Cleary about some of the subtle differences that remained, especially the way he walked and carried himself. The man was Jake, for sure, but there was something subtly different about him. Even

Brownie, their old lab, had noticed. More than once when Jake had limped into the room, she would bare her teeth at him. Not until Jamie would assure the dog that everything was okay would she lie back down. But even then she seemed to keep a close eye on Jake.

“That’s part of the amnesia,” Dr. Cleary had explained. His tone had been reassuring and Jamie was grateful. She still remembered that terrible day when she’d read Jake’s chart, and how it had felt to doubt whether he was indeed her husband. The doctor went on, explaining the situation in a way that eased her vague concerns completely.

“When a person loses his long-term memory, he sometimes loses the ability to act like himself. In this case, Jake remembers how to talk and walk, just not how to talk and walk like himself. This could affect his word choices, his mannerisms, even the way he carries himself. It’s only natural that your dog might not truly recognize him.”

The news was helpful, and it made Jamie feel better. But still, it was strange to have him walk past without working his arm around her waist and pulling her close for a slow kiss, odd to see him talk to Sierra without stooping down and giving her the horsey rides she missed so much.

Jamie drew in a sharp breath, and the sound of it caught his attention. Of the two books, this time he was reading his journal, and he peered at her over the top of it. The moment he did, his eyes lit up and he set the book down beside him. “We need to go to the beach.”

She stared at him. What was this? Was he actually starting to remember? “The ... the beach?”

“Yes.” Enthusiasm filled his scratchy voice, and a smile flashed on his face. “So we can jet ski.”

“You mean you ...” Jamie’s jaw dropped, and her mouth was suddenly dry. “You remember that?”

The corners of Jake’s mouth fell back into place. “No.” He pointed to the journal on the bed beside him. “But I know I used to love it. We both did.”

Disappointment cast a momentary shadow over the moment. When it was gone, Jamie nodded, willing away the tears that stung at her eyes. “So you're ready to get out again?”

“Yes.” He sat up a little straighter in bed and grinned. “I want to play tennis and jet ski with you—even if I'm no good at it now. And I want to have picnics with Sierra.”

“Jake ...” She angled her head, and a single happy cry came from deep inside her. “I want that too.”

“And that's not all.” He ran his fingers through his stubby dark hair. It had grown nearly half an inch since the surgery, and it needed to be styled. But he would have to wait and go to a barber later, once he was getting out more. He was so anxious his words ran together. “I want to see the guys from the station, talk to them, and hear about the men we lost.” His eyes held hers, and his smile faded again. “I want to see Sue and Katy. Hug them and cry with them and grieve the death of my best friend the way I should've done weeks ago.”

Jamie's mind raced. The doctor had said this moment would come, but she hadn't expected it to come all at once. Listening to Jake now, it was as though he'd never lost his memory at all. She blinked and took a few steps closer. “Did ... did you get all that from those books?”

“Yes.” He narrowed his eyes some. “It's funny, because at first everything I read was fascinating, but I had no memory of any of it.” He glanced out the window and then back at her. “I've read the journal four times through now, the highlighted parts of the Bible, three times. And God is so good to me, Jamie. There's no question that at this point, the information, the thoughts and memories written there are starting to feel familiar. I'm not sure if that's because I've read it so often or because I'm starting to remember.” He gave her a sad grin. “But either way it feels wonderful.”

She crossed her arms, and a hundred questions demanded expression. What about her? Was he starting to remember how they'd been together,

how much he'd loved her, or how beautiful their physical love had been before his injuries?

He seemed to sense her thoughts, and he patted the place on the bed beside him. "Come here, Jamie."

Her heart skipped a beat, but she did as he said. Her gaze never left his as she took small steps and made her way beside his bed. She hesitated there, but he tapped the spot next to him once more. This time she sat down on the edge of the mattress, unable to breathe for her nervousness.

"Jamie, I'm sorry." He brought his hand up and framed her face with it, his eyes searching hers. "I know that I love you. I know it in my head." He touched the journal with his other hand. "I study my words, and I'm breathless with how much I love you. But I haven't been able to tell you, because when I do ... I want it to come from my heart, from the way it'll be when my memory returns. Not because it's a fact, but because it's really how I feel."

The tears came, and there was nothing she could do to stop them. She blinked so she could see him clearly. "I ... I understand, Jake."

"The thing is ..." He let his voice trail off and gazed at the ceiling for a moment. Frustration etched itself into his expression as he caught her eyes once more. "The thing is I *do* love you. I see the way you care for me, the steps you've taken to keep things simple for me these past few weeks. Then I read about my feelings for you in the journal, even in my notes in the Bible. And I can't feel anything but love for you."

She nodded, not sure what to say. How could she be last on his list? How could he remember Sierra and God, but not her? It didn't make sense ... in fact it made her doubt whether he'd ever remember her fully again.

When she didn't say anything, he gently pulled her close and kissed her cheek. She stayed there, her face near his, breathing in the smell of him, the combination of his aftershave and deodorant, the faint scent of familiar detergent woven into his clothes. "Jake ..." Her heart pounded and she hung her head. "I miss you."

“Me too.” His voice was a whisper, a gentle breath against her cheek. “What we shared before ... before this nightmare.” He paused and nuzzled the healed part of his cheek ever so lightly against hers. “What we shared is something I can't wait to have again.” He pulled back and locked eyes with her. “I miss it, Jamie. I wish I could remember everything right now so we could start right here where we left off.”

The nearness of him was more than she could bear. She wanted to beg him to take her in his arms, lie down with her there on the guest room bed, and love her the way he'd loved her so many times before. She trembled with a desire that threw common sense out the window and made even thinking all but impossible.

“Jamie ...” Again he seemed to sense her feelings, and he slipped his arms around her, drawing her up against his chest, allowing her to be lost in the warmth of his embrace the way she'd been dying to do ever since he came home. His breathing became faster, and this time there was no question—he too was caught by the passion of the moment.

He brought his lips to her neck and made a trail of tender kisses from her collarbone to her ear. “You're so beautiful, Jamie ... I lie here thinking about you, wondering how long it'll be until ...”

His kisses were driving her crazy with desire, and she could feel herself angling her face toward his lips, drawing closer to him so they could kiss the way she wanted to. But she had to ask him something first, had to know what he was feeling inside. Not just physically, but emotionally. “Do ... do you remember this?” Her words were breathy and almost desperate as she arched her back and pressed in against him. “Do you, Jake? Do you remember how it was?”

“Oh, Jamie ...” A moan sounded from deep inside his chest, and he drew back slowly. His eyes were clouded in a desire that was as familiar to Jamie as her own heartbeat. Jake placed his hands on either side of her face and looked to a place inside her that she'd kept from him since he'd come home. “Jamie, I want this, I want all of it. Right here ... right now.” He



blinked and the desire faded some, but it was difficult for him to go on. “But I can't lie to you. I still don't remember it. Not the way I should.”

His words cut her deep and made her draw back a few inches. She wanted to cry or shout or scream that it wasn't fair, that she couldn't survive another day without knowing his love the way it had been before September 11. But she couldn't. It wasn't Jake's fault, and nothing good could come from upsetting him now. Lovemaking for the two of them had always been a sweetly subtle dance, but now Jake no longer remembered the steps or the music.

She sucked in a steadying breath and waited until she had the upper hand over her unbridled emotions. “Okay ... then let's wait.”

He pursed his lips and let the air ease from his lungs. His hands fell to his sides once more, and pain filled his eyes. “I'm sorry.”

“Don't, Jake.” She gave a few quick shakes of her head and stood, turning to face him, her back to the wall. The wanting she'd felt only a moment ago faded completely, and in its place was a different kind of desire. The desire only to see Jake return to the person he'd once been. She made her best attempt at a smile. “One of these days you'll remember.”

He swung his legs over the edge of the bed and looked up at her. Something about his expression reminded Jamie of Sierra. There was no question Jake was her father. He stretched his hands over his head.

“My body remembers, Jamie. Believe me on that, okay?”

She thought about how his breathing had quickened as he kissed her neck. “I know.” A sad chuckle sounded on her lips, and she waited, letting the moment pass. “So when do you want to start?”

“Start?” He blinked, his face blank.

This time she laughed out loud and tapped his foot with her tennis shoe. “Start living. You know, jet-skiing and picnics and talking with the guys at work. All that stuff you mentioned.”

He grinned. “That stuff. Yes ...”

A moment passed, and she enjoyed the struggle on his face, how

difficult it was for him to switch gears. If her nearness had made that kind of impact on him, then his days of remembering couldn't be far away.

He raised his eyebrows and grabbed a short breath. "How 'bout tomorrow?"

"Okay." Jamie leaned against the wall and lowered her chin. "What should we do?"

"Hmmm." Jake studied her, his eyes thoughtful. "Something the three of us can do together."

"Right." She was starting to like the idea. It seemed like years since they'd been out as a family.

"And something where I won't overdo it. Not on my first time out."

"Okay."

"I've got it ... " He gave her a pointed look tinged with innocence.

Suddenly, she knew that this was the thing he'd wanted to suggest to her all along.

"Let's go to church together. Then we can take a drive down to the beach and maybe walk along the shore."

The word "No" was almost out of Jamie's mouth when she stopped it. She searched Jake's eyes, trying to see if there was any guile there, any devious plan or ulterior motive. There was none. His journal entries obviously stated his concerns about her lack of faith and the fact that she didn't go to church. But his desire to have her beside him tomorrow for a Sunday service was only his attempt to join the living again in a way that involved Jamie and Sierra.

She bit her lip for a moment and then nodded. "Okay. We can do that."

As soon as she said the words, panic tapped her on the shoulder and sneered at her. If she went to church tomorrow, he'd expect her to go every week. And church simply wasn't something Jamie did. Not when the whole idea of God was still so senseless and unbelievable.

Jake reached out to her then and took her hand. "Thanks, Jamie." He

glanced at the journal and then back at her. "I know it won't be easy for you. In fact, I kind of thought you'd say no. But I think it'll be good for me. It'll ... it'll mean the world to have you and Sierra there."

Throughout the evening, Jamie had her doubts. But in the end, as she fell asleep that night alone in their bed, craving the feel of Jake beside her, and drowning in the memory of their nearness earlier that day, she knew she had no choice. She would gladly give up a part of herself, her convictions, her determinations, her right arm, if it meant she could in any way help Jake's memory return. Going to church wouldn't hurt her. But living without Jake beside her, missing his touch and his kiss for much longer, might do worse than that.

It might kill her.

## Vyf-en-twintig

13 Oktober 2001

Stukkie vir kosbare stukkie kan Jamie haar man voel terugkom.

Die dag nadat sy die Bybel en dagboek vir hom gegee het, het Jake dit na die gastekamer geneem en hom in die inhoud verloor. Die wonderlike gevolg was wanneer hulle as gesin onthyt en aandete sou eet, sou sy gesprekke en stille bepeinsings al hoe meer soos Jake Bryan s'n begin klink.

Dis laat Saterdagmiddag, amper drie weke nadat hy van die hospitaal af gekom het, en sy is moeg daarvoor om van hom af weg te bly. Selfs al lees hy wil sy naby hom wees, met hom praat. Uitvind of sy geheue besig is om deur die mistigheid in sy brein te breek. Sy loop na die gastekamer toe en stoot die deur saggies oop. Sy Bybel is voor hom en hy is so verdiep in wat hy lees dat hy haar nie opmerk nie. Sy leun teen die kosyn en kyk na hom. Hierdie lesery is eintlik al wat hy doen; vandat hy huis toe gekom het en sy die boeke vir hom gegee het, bestee hy die meeste van sy tyd daaraan.

Jamie het dr. Cleary gekontak en Jake se fassinatie met die leesstof verduidelik. "Moet ek bekommerd wees? Ek bedoel, hy sal eerder heeldag lees as om sy lewe buite die gastekamer te hervat."

"Dis honderd persent. Jy hoef glad nie bekommerd te wees nie, Jamie. Dis juis die soort ding wat hom sal help onthou. Hy sal jou laat weet wanneer hy gereed is om weer te begin lewe."

Die afgelope twee weke het Jamie dus niks meer gedoen as om sy wonde te versorg en sy maaltye voor te berei terwyl hy homself in die boeke begrawe het nie. Vriende van die kerk en brandweer het steeds kom inloer om hom

beterskap toe te wens, en enige soort hulp aan te bied om met sy herstel te help. Teen hierdie tyd het die oorlewende mans wat saam met hom gewerk het, van sy geheueverlies gehoor.

Maar tot dusver het Jamie hulle nie ingenooi nie. Sy ontvang hulle by die deur, gee 'n drukkie, gesels met hulle, en bring hulle op hoogte van Jake se herstel. Maar sy is van plan om streng by dr. Cleary se opdragte te hou, en hy het dit duidelik gemaak dat besoekers 'n stremmende uitwerking op Jake se genesing sal hê. Jake moet nou 'n eenvoudige lewe lei, so na moontlik aan die een wat hy voor sy besering gehad het.

Wanneer dít vir hom bekend raak, sal hy gereed wees om die ouens van die stasie te sien. Jamie voel buitendien aaklig wanneer Jake se vriende daar is, want nie een van hulle wil met haar oor Larry Henning of die ander ouens praat wat tydens die aanvalle dood is nie. Vanselfsprekend praat hulle onder mekaar oor die leegheid en die enorme verlies van soveel helde wat hulle lewe gewaag het om ander mense te red. Maar in haar teenwoordigheid sê hulle baie min.

Sy wil ook nie oor die vermiste mans praat nie; trouens, sedert die aanvalle het sy nog nie weer met Sue gepraat nie. Die paar kere wat Jamie gebel het, het Sue geslaap of was daar familie by haar. Die omvang van die tragedie is besig om by die departement in te sink, en Jamie is tevrede om ten minste gedeeltelik daarteen beskerm te word.

Die werk op Ground Zero word nie meer 'n reddingspoging genoem nie. Dis 'n opruimingsoperasie, en dit kan net een ding beteken. Larry is dood. Jamie, en veral Jake, sal die verlies in 'n stadium moet verwerk, maar nie nou al nie. Nie voor haar man homself ontdek het nie. Tot tyd en wyl is Jamie meer as bereid om al haar krag aan Jake te wy en haar eie rouproses ook uit te stel.

Hy het haar nog nie opgemerk waar sy hom staan en bestudeer nie. Hy is te vasgevang in 'n wêreld waarna hy met sy hele hart soek. Sy wonde is besig om te genees. Daar is nog net 'n paar plekke wat verbind moet word – 'n area op sy voorkop en linkerwang, en kolle op albei voorarms. Sy vel is rooi en gevlek en sy stem is nog nie normaal nie, maar hy lyk elke dag 'n bietjie meer soos die ou Jake. Hy gebruik ook nie meer die krukke nie, en alhoewel sy been steeds gespalk is, het hy nie meer hulp nodig om rond te beweeg nie. Sy het met dr. Cleary gepraat oor sommige van die subtiele veranderinge wat nie weggaan nie, veral die manier waarop hy loop en sy liggaamshouding. Sy weet die man is Jake, maar daar is iets subtiel anders aan hom. Selfs Brownie, hulle ou labrador, merk dit. Dit het al meer as een maal gebeur dat sy haar tande wys wanneer Jake by die kamer inkom. Dis eers wanneer Jamie die hond gerusstel dat daar nie fout is nie, dat sy gaan lê. Maar dan is dit asof sy steeds 'n wakende oog oor Jake hou.

“Dis deel van die amnesie,” het dr. Cleary verduidelik. Sy stem was gerusstellend en Jamie was verlig. Sy onthou nog die aaklige dag toe sy Jake se pasiëntekaart gelees het, en die verskriklike vertwyfeling of hy regtig haar man was. Die dokter het vervolg en die situasie op 'n manier verduidelik wat

haar vae kommer heeltemal uit die weg geruim het.

“Wanneer iemand sy langtermyngeheue verloor, verloor hy soms die vermoë om soos homself op te tree. In hierdie geval onthou Jake hoe om te praat en te loop, net nie hoe om soos homself te praat en te loop nie. Dit kan sy woordkeuses, sy gewoontes, selfs sy liggaamshouding beïnvloed. Dis heeltemal normaal dat julle hond hom nie regtig herken nie.”

Die welkome nuus het Jamie beter laat voel. Maar dis steeds vreemd as hy verby haar loop sonder om sy arm om haar middel te sit en haar stadig te soen, vreemd wanneer hy na Sierra toe gaan sonder om te buk en haar die perdjieritte te gee waarna sy so smag.

Jamie trek haar asem skerp in en die geluid trek sy aandag. Hierdie keer is hy besig om uit sy dagboek te lees en hy kyk bo-oor die boek na haar. Sy oë verhelder toe hy haar sien en hy sit die boek neer. “Ons moet strand toe gaan.” Sy staar hom aan. En dit? Is sy geheue sowaar besig om terug te kom? “Die ... die strand?”

“Ja.” Sy krapperige stem is vol entoesiasme en ’n glimlag verskyn op sy gesig. “Ons moet gaan waterponie ry.”

“Jy bedoel jy ... ” Jamie se mond val oop en is skielik droog. “Jy onthou dit?” Jake se gesig val. “Nee.” Hy wys na die dagboek op die bed langs hom. “Maar ek weet ek was mal daaroor. Ons al twee was.”

’n Gevoel van teleurstelling werp ’n vlietende skadu oor die oomblik. Toe dit oor is, knik Jamie en onderdruk die tranes wat wil-wil kom. “So jy sien kans om uit te gaan?”

“Ja.” Hy sit regop en glimlag. “Ek wil saam met jou tennis speel en waterponie ry – selfs al sal dit aan die begin sukkelrig gaan. En ek wil saam met Sierra gaan piekniek hou.”

“Jake ... ” Sy hou haar kop skeef en ’n sagte gelukkige geluid kom uit haar binneste. “Ek wil ook.”

“En dis nie al nie.” Hy vryf oor sy stoppelrige donker hare. Dit het sedert die operasie al ’n sentimeter gegroei en hy moet iets daaraan doen. Maar hy sal moet wag en later na ’n haarkapper toe gaan wanneer hy meer gereeld uitkom. Hy is so angstig dat sy woorde almal gelyk kom. “Ek wil die ouens van die stasie sien, met hulle praat en hoor van die manne wat ons verloor het.” Sy oë hou hare gevange, en sy glimlag raak weg. “Ek wil by Sue en Katy gaan kuier. Hulle vashou en saam met hulle huil oor die dood van my beste vriend, en treur soos ek weke gelede al moes doen.”

Jamie weet nie wat om te dink nie. Die dokter het gesê hierdie oomblik sou kom, maar sy het nie verwag dat alles op een slag sou kom nie. Om Jake so te hoor praat, laat dit klink asof hy nooit sy geheue verloor het nie. Sy knip haar oë en kom ’n paar treë nader. “Het ... het jy dit alles uit die boeke gekry?”

“Ja.” Hy vernou sy oë effens. “Dis snaaks, want aanvanklik was alles baie fassinerend, maar ek het geen herinneringe daaraan gehad nie.” Hy kyk deur die venster en dan weer terug na haar. “Ek het die dagboek nou vier maal deurgelees, en die onderstreepte gedeeltes in die Bybel drie keer. En God is so

goed vir my, Jamie. Daar is op die oomblik geen twyfel dat die inligting, die gedagtes en inskrywings begin bekend voel nie. Ek's nie seker of dit so is omdat ek dit so dikwels gelees het en of ek begin onthou nie." Hy gee 'n hartseer laggie. "Hoe dit ook al sy, dit voel wonderlik."

Sy vou haar arms en honderd vrae dring hulle aan haar op. Wat van haar? Onthou hy iets van hulle saamwees, van hoe lief hy vir haar was, hoe mooi hulle fisiese liefde voor sy ongeluk was?

Asof hy haar gedagtes kan lees, tik hy langs hom op die bed. "Kom hier, Jamie."

Haar hart mis 'n slag, maar sy doen wat hy vra. Haar oë bly in syne terwyl sy na sy bed toe loop. Toe sy langs sy bed aarsel, tik hy weer langs hom. Hierdie keer gaan sit sy op die rand van die matras, so senuweeagtig dat sy nie kan asemhaal nie.

"Jamie, ek's jammer." Hy kelk sy hand om haar wang terwyl sy oë ondersoekend in hare kyk. "Ek weet dat ek vir jou lief is. Ek weet dit met my kop." Hy raak aan die dagboek met sy ander hand. "Wanneer ek my woorde lees, is ek verwonderd oor my liefde vir jou. Maar ek kon dit nog nie vir jou sê nie, want wanneer ek dit doen ... wil ek hê dit moet uit my hart kom, soos dit sal wees wanneer my geheue terugkom. Nie omdat dit 'n feit is nie, maar omdat dit is hoe ek regtig voel."

Die trane kom, maar Jamie kan niks doen om dit te keer nie. Sy knipper haar oë sodat sy hom deur haar trane kan sien. "Ek ... ek verstaan, Jake."

"Die ding is ..." Sy stem vervaag en hy kyk vir 'n oomblik na die plafon. Sy oë is vol frustrasie toe hy hare weer ontmoet. "Die ding is, ek is lief vir jou. Ek sien hoe jy my versorg, hoe hard jy probeer om alles hierdie afgelope paar weke eenvoudig te hou. Ek lees van my gevoelens vir jou in die dagboek, selfs in my aantekeninge in die Bybel. En ek kan nie anders as om vir jou lief te wees nie."

Sy knik, onseker oor wat om te sê. Hoe kan sy laaste op sy lys wees? Hoe kan hy Sierra en God onthou, maar nie vir haar nie? Dit maak nie sin nie ... trouens, dit laat haar wonder of hy haar ooit weer heeltemal gaan onthou.

Toe sy niks sê nie, trek hy haar sagkens nader en soen haar op die wang. Sy bly daar, haar gesig naby syne. Sy geur vul haar neusgate, die kombinasie van sy naskeermiddel en deodorant, die vae geur van wasgoedseep in sy klere.

"Jake ..." Haar hart klop onstuimig en sy laat sak haar kop. "Ek mis jou."

"Ek ook." Sy stem is 'n fluistering teen haar wang. "Wat ons voor ... hierdie nagmerrie gedeel het." Hy bly stil en raak met die gesonde deel van sy wang liggies aan hare. "Ek kan nie wag om dit wat ons gedeel het terug te hê nie." Hy sit agteroor en kyk in haar oë. "Ek mis dit, Jamie. Ek wens ek kon alles hier en nou onthou sodat ons kan begin waar ons opgehou het."

Sy nabyheid is meer as wat sy kan verduur. Sy wil hom smeek om haar in sy arms te neem, om haar te liefkoos soos so baie kere in die verlede. 'n Begeerte wat alle nugterheid en helderheid verswelg, golf deur haar.

"Jamie ..." Dis weer asof hy haar emosies aanvoel, want hy sit sy arms om

haar en trek haar teen hom vas. Sy het hierdie afgelope twee weke gebrand om haar in die warmte van sy omhelsing te verloor. Hy begin vinniger asemhaal, en hierdie keer is daar geen onsekerheid by haar nie – hy is ongetwyfeld in dieselfde passie vasgevang.

Hy laat sak sy kop teen haar nek en sy mond beweeg liefkosend van haar sleutelbeen na haar oor. “Jy is so mooi, Jamie ... ek lê so baie en dink aan jou, wonder hoe lank dit nog gaan wees voor ...”

Sy soene maak haar waansinnig van begeerte, en sy kantel haar gesig na sy lippe sodat hulle mekaar op die manier kan soen waarna sy smag. Maar sy moet hom eers iets vra; sy moet weet hoe hy binnekant voel. Nie net fisies nie, maar emosioneel. “Onthou jy?” Haar woorde is asemrig en amper desperaat wanneer sy haar rug hol maak om nog nader aan hom te kom. “Onthou jy, Jake? Onthou jy hoe dit was?”

“Ag, Jamie ...” Hy kreun diep toe hy haar stadig laat gaan. Sy oë is donker van ’n begeerte waarmee Jamie so bekend soos haar eie is. Jake kelk haar gesig in sy hande en sien iets in Jamie se hart wat sy tot nog toe van hom weerhou het. “Jamie, ek wil dit hê, ek wil alles hê. Vandag ... hier.” Hy knip sy oë en dis asof sy begeerte taan, maar dis moeilik vir hom om aan te gaan. “Maar ek kan nie vir jou jok nie. Ek onthou nog steeds nie. Nie soos ek moet nie.”

Sy woorde sny deur haar, laat haar ’n entjie van hom af wegsit. Sy wil huil of gil of skree dat dit nie regverdig is nie, dat sy nie nog ’n dag sal oorleef sonder die liefde wat hy voor 11 September vir haar gehad het nie. Maar sy kan nie. Dis nie Jake se skuld nie, en dit sal niks help om hom nou te ontstel nie. Hulle fisiese verhouding was altyd ’n subtiële liefdesdans, maar Jake onthou nie meer die passies of die musiek nie.

Sy trek haar asem in en wag totdat sy die oorhand oor haar emosies het. “Oukei ... dan wag ons eerder.”

Hy plooi sy lippe en blaas sy asem stadig uit. Sy hande val na sy sye en die pyn is sigbaar in sy oë. “Ek’s jammer.”

“Moenie wees nie, Jake.” Sy skud haar kop ’n paar maal vinnig, staan op en gaan staan met haar rug na die muur. Die begeerte wat so flussies in haar gebrand het, is heeltemal weg, en sy ervaar nou ’n ander soort begeerte. Die begeerte om te sien hoe Jake weer die mens word wat hy was. Sy kry dit reg om te glimlag. “Een van die dae gaan jy onthou.”

Hy swaai sy bene oor die rand van die bed en kyk op na haar. Iets aan sy uitdrukking herinner Jamie aan Sierra. Daar bestaan geen twyfel dat Jake haar pa is nie. Hy strek sy arms bokant sy kop.

“My lyf onthou, Jamie. Glo my.”

Sy dink aan hoe sy asemhaling versnel het toe hy haar nek gesoen het. “Ek weet.” Sy gee ’n hartseer laggie en wag totdat die oomblik verby is. “Nou toe, wanneer wil jy begin?”

“Begin?” Hy knip sy oë vraend.

Hierdie keer lag sy hardop en raak speels met haar skoene aan sy voet. “Begin

lewe. Jy weet, waterponie ry en pieknik hou en met die ouens by die stasie gaan gesels. Al die goed wat jy netnou opgenoem het.”

Hy grinnik. “Daai goed. Ja ... ”

’n Oomblik gaan verby en sy geniet die worsteling op sy gesig, sy moeite om sy gedagtes weer agtermekaar te kry. As haar nabyheid hierdie soort uitwerking op hom het, kan sy dae van onthou nie meer te ver weg wees nie.

Hy lig sy wenkbroue en skep gou asem. “Wat van môre?”

“Oukei.” Jamie leun teen die muur en laat sak haar ken. “Waarvoor is jy lus?”

“Hmmm.” Jake kyk nadenkend na haar. “Iets wat ons drie saam kan doen.”

“Nou goed.” Sy begin van die idee hou. Dit voel soos jare sedert hulle iets as gesin saam gedoen het.

“En iets waar ek my nie kan ooreis nie. Nie op my eerste uitstappie nie.”

“Oukei.”

“Ek weet ... ” Hy kyk onskuldig na haar.

Skielik weet sy hy wou dit van die begin af voorstel.

“Kom ons gaan saam kerk toe. Dan kan ons see toe ry en op die strand gaan stap.”

Die woord “nee” is amper uit, toe Jamie haarself keer. Sy kyk ondersoekend in Jake se oë om te sien of daar enige onderduimsheid, ’n slinkse plan of bymotief is. Sy dagboek bevat vanselfsprekend inskrywings oor sy kommer oor haar gebrek aan geloof en die feit dat sy nie kerk toe gaan nie. Maar sy begeerte om haar môre langs hom in die kerk te hê, is net ’n poging om weer te begin lewe met Jamie en Sierra by hom.

Sy byt vir ’n oomblik op haar lip en knik toe. “Oukei. Ons maak so.”

Toe die woorde uit is, ervaar sy ’n paniekerigheid wat vir haar tong uitsteek. As sy môre kerk toe gaan, sal hy dit elke week van haar verwag. En kerk is eenvoudig nie deel van Jamie se lewe nie. Nie terwyl die hele idee van God steeds so sinneloos en ongeloofbaar is nie.

Jake steek sy hand uit en neem hare. “Dankie, Jamie.” Hy kyk na die dagboek en weer na haar. “Ek weet dit gaan nie vir jou maklik wees nie. Om die waarheid te sê, ek het gedink jy gaan nee sê. Maar ek dink dit sal my goeddoen. Dit ... dit sal ontsettend baie vir my beteken om jou en Sierra daar te hê.”

Vir die res van die dag het Jamie haar bedenkinge. Maar toe sy daardie nag uiteindelik alleen in hulle bed aan die slaap raak, pynlik bewus van Jake se leë plek langs haar, en hunkerend na hulle intimiteit van vroeër die dag, weet sy dat sy nie ’n keuse het nie. Sy sal nie huiwer om ’n deel van haarself, haar oortuigings, haar wil of haar regterarm te gee as sy Jake kan help om sy geheue terug te kry nie.

Dit kan nie kwaad doen om kerk toe te gaan nie. Maar om sonder Jake langs haar te lewe, om veel langer sonder sy aanraking en liefkosings te bestaan, kan meer doen.

Dit kan haar doodmaak.



# Chapter TWENTY-SIX

OCTOBER 14, 2001

The moment they climbed out of her van and headed across the church parking lot, Jamie wondered if she'd made a mistake. Jake's presence at church that Sunday was bound to cause more than a little stir among the congregation. None of them knew about his amnesia, and the attention wasn't something Jamie had considered.

It took just seconds before a family pulled up in a sedan two parking spots away, climbed out of their car, and stared at Jake. The man pulled himself from the group and took three long strides toward them. "Jake ... we've missed you." He looked at Jamie. "I'm Tom. You must be Jake's wife."

"Yes." She gave him a polite smile but kept her distance.

"Jake ..." Tom reached his hand out, and Jake shook it. The stranger's eyes welled up. "I'm ... I'm sorry about your buddies. About all of it. We've been praying." He shrugged. "The whole country's praying."

Jamie could feel Jake's uneasiness.

He shifted his weight some and nodded. "Thanks."

There was a sad hesitation, then the man gave Jake a half grin. "You look great."

Sierra worked her way to the other side of Jake and took his hand. A smile lit up her face, and it was obvious she agreed with the man. "Daddy's getting better!"

"It must feel good to get out." The sun was bright that morning, and a cool breeze played through the trees that lined the parking lot.

"Yep." Jake squinted and cast a look toward the church entrance.

There was nothing left to say, and Jamie could feel the moment grow awkward. "Excuse us ..." She nestled against Jake's side and took two small steps forward. "We don't want to be late."

"Right." The man dropped Jake's hand and shot one more smile at

him. "We're here for you." He looked at Jamie. "All of you. Anything you need."

"Thanks." Jamie's answer was quick, and the man got the hint. He nodded once more and returned to his family. When he was out of earshot, Jamie leaned close to Jake and whispered, "They don't know about the amnesia, right?"

"Not unless you've told them."

"No." She fell in step beside him. "I only told the guys at the station. I haven't said a word to anyone else." Jamie thought about that as they headed for the church's front door. Of course she hadn't said anything. She didn't know these people, not one of them, because Jake had kept this part of his life separate from her, not wanting to pressure or force her to believe as he did. Not wanting to burden her with talk about faith or religion or even God. Unless it was something she wanted. And even though they'd been very kind, bringing meals by and making promises of prayer for their family, Jamie wasn't about to share private details with them.

Fifteen yards separated them from the church doors, and along the way three other people waved or approached Jake with hugs and statements that they'd been praying for him. Jamie cast an occasional glance at Jake, and she felt him press in closer to her. He seemed to sense the way the attention of these strangers made her feel uncomfortable. He might not remember his past, but his journal had taught him lots about her. He had to know that attending church with him was not easy for her.

He brought his head close to hers and spoke in a voice only she could hear. "You okay?"

She licked her lower lip and shrugged. "Nervous."

Sierra was skipping along on the other side of him, her hand tucked in his. But now, for the first time since the terrorist attacks, Jamie felt Jake reach for her hand and weave his fingers between hers. The sensation made her knees weak. In a rush of familiarity, she felt instantly at ease. She was with Jake and Sierra, together as a family for the first time in more than a

month. And not even a sermon could touch the joy of that.

They went inside, Jake limping and leading the way. With every person who approached them, Jake pretended he remembered.

“God is always faithful,” he'd say. Or, “I felt your prayers every hour.”

These were things Jake would've said, without a doubt, things he believed. But Jamie knew they weren't statements he ever remembered saying. In fact, in a ten-minute period Jake pulled off a performance that was worthy of an Academy Award, one that would've been impossible without the time he'd invested in reading his Bible and his journal.

People continued to approach Jake, and the attention he was getting gave Jamie the chance to glance around the inside of the church. It was actually fairly nice looking. A few banners with Bible words written on them, but none of the statues and stained glass she'd found so intimidating back when she was a child.

The people continued to come, thrilled for a chance to connect once more with Jake and to pass on their thanks. He was among the city's most famous heroes now. Not that he hadn't been before. But the status awarded firefighters in the weeks since September 11 went way beyond ordinary hero and skyrocketed up into the realms of celebrity. Normally this much attention might have shaken Jamie, but as long as Jake had hold of her hand, as long as he stood tall and strong by her side, she felt perfectly content.

They checked Sierra into Sunday school and then made their way to a pew toward the back of the church. As soon as they sat down, a dozen people came up and offered still more kind words and assurances of continued prayer. Jamie watched them, struck by the light in their eyes. It was then that she finally noticed something about these people. Their love wasn't only for Jake.

It was for her too.

Though Jamie had never come with him, though these people had

never seen her even once at church, they hugged her and offered whatever help she might need. Several of them had tears in their eyes. The realization brought back Jamie's feelings from before September 11. Sierra had been asking her to come to church with them, and Jamie's interest had been roused.

Here, now, she was curious once more. She might not believe, but she didn't have to hold something against these people. Clearly, they loved her family and even her. The least she could do was give them a chance.

An older woman approached and patted Jamie's hand. "Well, hello, dear. It's so good to finally meet you."

A man behind her smiled big at Jamie. "We're family, remember. If there's anything we can do to help, please let us know."

By the time the service started, Jamie's head was spinning. She'd gone from curious to baffled. Was this what she'd been afraid of? A warmly lit building filled with kind people, a place where she felt surrounded by comforting words? She stared at her lap for a moment and tried to collect her thoughts. It didn't matter how nice the place felt. What mattered was the fact that by sitting here she was making a mockery of herself. She didn't believe in God. Especially since September 11. It was wrong for her to be here, and as soon as Jake's memory returned, she wouldn't be back.

She wouldn't be a hypocrite.

The pastor took the pulpit, and Jamie steeled herself. This was the part where he'd do one of two things. He'd either shout at them about hell—making them feel guilty for every careless thought and pressuring them to believe. Or he'd give a sugarcoated message about how everything always worked out for those who believed.

Jamie huffed quietly to herself. *Tell that to the people buried in the rubble of the World Trade Center.* She dismissed her thoughts and worked her fingers more tightly between Jake's. The preacher could talk all day as long as she had Jake's hand in hers, his warm body beside her.

Someone had handed Jamie a bulletin when she came in. Now she

opened it and scanned the list of pastors until she found the name of the man about to speak. Pastor Jason Ritchie. Jamie closed the pamphlet and set it on the seat next to her.

“Good morning and welcome to First Community Church.” He smiled, and something about the man reminded her of Jake's father. “If you're visiting with us today, we're glad you came.” He looked around the congregation until his eyes fell on Jake and Jamie. “We have someone very special with us today. Many of you know that Jake Bryan is part of the church family here. He's a firefighter with FDNY, and back on September 11, he nearly lost his life in the World Trade Center.” The man paused. “Jake's here today, well enough to join us this morning.” The man's voice sounded strained, and for a moment he seemed to fight tears. “Let's give Jake a welcome back.”

People all around began to clap, and after a few seconds, a row of people stood and then another and another until the entire congregation was on its feet, clapping and looking at Jake. Tears streamed down the faces of several of them. Jamie leaned in closer to Jake, her heart touched by this outpouring. Was this what she'd been missing? People young and old who saw Jake as part of their family?

In a way it reminded her of the love at the fire station. But this was different. These people didn't love Jake because he was a firefighter; they loved him because they shared the same faith, the same God. Whole or broken, flawed or not—their common bond was one Jamie had only that morning begun to understand.

When the people returned to their seats, Pastor Ritchie began telling them a story about Jesus and a few of his friends. Mary, Martha, and Lazarus—siblings who shared a home together. The story went that Jesus cared about these three in a special way. So it was when Lazarus took sick and died, Jesus was deeply moved.

“See,” the pastor's voice rang clear and true, and Jamie found herself listening, so caught up in the story that she forgot to be leery of it. “Death

was not a part of Christ's plan. It never had been.” He hesitated. “Certainly as he listened to Mary and Martha cry for their dead brother, Jesus was reminded that life was never supposed to hold that type of pain and loss.” His voice dropped a notch. “What did Mary and Martha say to Jesus, anyway?” He paused. “They said, ‘Lord ... if you'd been here this wouldn't have happened.’”

Pastor Ritchie sauntered across the stage and made eye contact with people on the far side of the church. “Since the terrorist attacks, we're tempted to say the same thing, aren't we?” He gave them a sad smile before turning and making his way toward the other side of the congregation. “We rail and shout and shake our fists at God, yelling at Him through our tears. ‘If only You'd been here, God ... in the buildings where You were supposed to be ... none of this would've happened.’” The pastor stopped and squared himself toward the middle of the room. “But is that really the way it is?”

He returned to the story of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. As he did, Jamie waited anxiously for each word. Why hadn't she heard this story before? And when was he going to start yelling at them? She glanced at Jake beside her, but his attention belonged completely to Pastor Ritchie—almost as though this were a part of his life he remembered perfectly. Jamie wondered if he really did, or if spending all those hours in the Bible had created a new belief as strong as the one he'd forgotten.

Finally, the pastor reached the part in the story where Jesus went to the tomb, the place where Lazarus was buried. The congregation was silent as Pastor Ritchie searched their faces. “Jesus was surrounded by weeping people, folks He knew and loved, and He was staring at the tomb of a man who had been like a brother to Him.” The pastor narrowed his eyes. “What did Jesus do? Did He look at them and tell them everything would be okay?”

Jamie wanted the end of the story so badly she could barely sit still. She squirmed and leaned forward a bit.

“No.” The pastor gave them a half smile. “Did He shout at them, yell at them, ask them where their faith was? Berate them for grieving when He'd promised them it would all work out in the end?” Pastor Ritchie shook his head. “No, Jesus did none of those things. Do you know what He did?”

Jamie had no idea.

“He cried.” The pastor's voice dropped a notch. “He wept right alongside them.” Pastor Ritchie held up a Bible, and the man had tears in his eyes. “Sometimes I think John 11:35 is my favorite verse in the whole book. Because it tells us Jesus cares. If we cry, He cries. No question about it.”

The pastor began to pace again and wrapped up his sermon. “The truth was, Jesus had it all figured out that day. He shouted at the tomb and ordered his dead friend to come out, and that's exactly what Lazarus did.” Pastor Ritchie smiled bigger than before. “And everything worked out just as it was supposed to.” He cast a look in Jake's direction. “But that didn't mean death would stop dancing on our earthly days. Since the snake entered the garden, it has done that, and it always will.” He gave a shake of his head. “Rather ... the story of Jesus and Lazarus is a prototype, an illustration that with Christ, death will not have the last dance. Not ever.”

He took a few more steps, stopped, and faced them again. “Those of us in Staten Island lost seventy-eight firefighters on September 11. Some of you here today worked with or lived among those fallen heroes. Others of you lost family and friends who worked in the World Trade Center.”

He paused, and across the church, Jamie could hear the muffled sound of several people sniffing or reaching for tissues. Tears filled her own eyes as the pastor continued.

“God's message for you this morning isn't that everything will be okay here on earth, because it won't. The rotten, sorrowful smell of death is still too strong among us for me to tell you anything but the truth.” He held up a single finger. “But death will not have the last say. For those who

believe in Jesus—in a God who would cry alongside you—death will never have the last word. And that, dear friends, is the hope we can take home with us. Hope that comes packaged in that very special story about Mary, Martha, and Lazarus.”

He was finished speaking, and he asked them to close their eyes, bow their heads, and pray. “Every Sunday I do my best to give you a glimpse of Jesus, a picture of the man that He was, the God that He is. And each week I give you the same chance I give you today. The most important decision you'll ever make is what to do with Jesus Christ. Today, right here, you can decide to have a friendship with Jesus, a relationship with the One who weeps alongside you in all your pain, the One who knows that if only you'd take His hand, everything really will work out in the end.”

Jamie's heartbeat doubled, and her defenses dropped like so many autumn leaves. She'd never thought about God that way, never imagined Him as a friend who cried with her and cared for her. It was all she could do to remember that she wasn't a believer, that this information was fine for people like Jake, but not for her. Not when God had taken her parents so swiftly and surely; not when He'd robbed Jake of his best friend and allowed the deaths of so many innocent people. She blinked and tried to focus.

“Others of you have been believers for a long time, but you need a chance to recommit, a chance to tell God yes all over again. Yes you believe, yes, you want Him to lead your life from this point on. Yes, you want to know your eternity is safe with Him.” Pastor Ritchie's voice was filled with concern. “If you fit into either of these categories this morning, please—right now while everyone has their eyes closed—raise your hand.” He waited for a minute. “Okay, I see you over there. And you near the side.”

Jamie felt a subtle movement beside her, and she opened her eyes just a crack. Jake's hand was high in the air, and watery streams made their way down either side of his face. The image of her husband weeping, his hand



high in the air, seized Jamie's heart and shot it into her throat. She had the sudden urge to join him, to raise her hand and say yes to a God who would stand by her and cry with her.

If only she could believe.

Instead, she tucked her free hand beneath her leg and gritted her teeth. A God like that wouldn't want her, anyway. Not after she'd spent so many years rejecting Him, dismissing Him, and refusing to believe He even existed.

Pastor Ritchie's voice interrupted her thoughts. "If you're one who has your hand raised, why don't you come down here to the front. We have people who want to pray with you, help you nail down what a relationship with God actually looks like."

Jake stood, and Jamie could feel his good leg shaking. He tapped her on the shoulder and motioned for her to come with him, but this time she shook her head. She couldn't go, couldn't venture into a place where people were doing the one thing that had terrified her all her life—putting their stock in a God who allowed bad things to happen.

An older man with a name tag pinned to his shirt appeared at the end of their pew. He held out his hand, and Jake went to him. He turned back just once and gave her a final sad look. Then he met up with the man, and together they moved slowly down the aisle until Jake disappeared through a door to the right of the stage.

After the service Jake found her back at the pew, and the moment Jamie's eyes met his, she began to shake. He no longer had that vacant, uncertain look she'd come to expect. Instead, his eyes glowed with a love and depth that Jamie hadn't realized was missing until now. It was a look that had always set Jake apart, a look that gave people a glimpse of his soul. The peace and joy Jamie saw there now made her wonder if a miracle had happened in the room, if maybe now that Jake had his faith in God back, he might've remembered everything else too.

It wasn't until after they'd picked up Sierra and made their way out to

the beach that Jake shared his thoughts about what had happened back at church. They'd brought folding chairs and they set them up on the sand. Sierra took a shovel and pail and set about building a castle closer to the shore.

"Why didn't you come with me?" He gazed out at the harbor, his voice more curious than hurt. The breeze had picked up, but the afternoon was still warmer than usual for October.

"I couldn't." She exhaled hard and watched Sierra, the simple joy written across her face. "It wouldn't be right. Not when I don't believe." She cast him a quick glance. "Surely you know that much, at least, Jake. Doesn't your journal tell you how I feel about God and church?" He reached over and took her hand in his, and Jamie silently celebrated. The familiar gesture was becoming natural again. For a long time he was silent, rubbing his thumb over the back of her hand.

"You believe, Jamie. I could feel you there beside me, believing every word the pastor said."

Jamie's mind raced. No ... he couldn't say that, couldn't make her admit to something she wasn't ready to admit to herself. "I've ... I've never believed."

This time he looked at her. "Yes, you did. At camp that year, back when you gave your life to Christ and told me you'd never felt better in all your life."

"Jake ..." Time seemed to stand still, and Jamie could feel the color drain from her face. "You remember that?"

His eyes met hers, and he searched her heart. "Yes." The uncertainty in his eyes matched what he must've seen in hers. "I mean, I've read it five times in my journal. But yes ... I remember it." He looked away. "At least I think I do." A few minutes passed while they both watched Sierra. Jake slipped the shoe off his good foot and wriggled his toes in the sand. "It feels so good to be out here. To be with you and Sierra ... after being together at church with you. Like it's the most right way we could've spent

our Sunday.”

Jamie crossed her arms. Her heartbeat was fast and jittery. She was still trying to catch her breath from the idea that Jake might be remembering, that he could—at least in part—recall their time at summer camp that year. “Can I tell you something?”

“Sure?” Jake’s expression was bathed in peace.

“I’m afraid about God.” There ... she’d said it. She’d voiced a thought that even she hadn’t been sure of until that very moment.

“Why?” Jake brought her hand to his lips and kissed it. “What about God scares you?”

“He ...” She leaned back in her chair and clenched her jaw. Angry tears forged their way down her cheeks, leaking from a place in her soul that had been boarded up for too many years. “He took my parents.” She made a fist with her free hand and placed it over her heart. “I was just a girl, Jake. But my parents both died and ... and neither of them believed in God.”

Jake listened, giving her the space she needed to finish.

She sniffed hard and wiped at her tears, but they only came harder. “What am I supposed to think? That a loving God would allow my parents to die and go to hell? All because they made the fatal mistake of not believing?”

Jake waited a moment, and when he finally spoke, his raspy voice was filled with a tenderness that felt achingly familiar. “Did you ever think ... that maybe as they lay in that car that night they might’ve changed their minds? The Bible says God doesn’t care when people come to Him—He just cares *that* they come. I read that the other day. Maybe your mom and dad cried out to God in those last moments ... maybe they’re in heaven even now, Jamie. Did you ever think of that?”

*Maybe they were in heaven?*

The idea made Jamie dizzy, but it struck a note inside her heart that had never been played. What if Jake was right? What if just maybe her

parents had given their lives to God there on the highway, amidst their dying moments? And even if they hadn't, a God who could stand beside His friends and weep with them wasn't one that would make a mistake with her parents. "Okay, but why did they have to die? Can you tell me that?"

Jake looked at her again, his eyes tender. "People die, Jamie. There're no promises here on earth. God didn't make your parents die that night; and He didn't bring the World Trade Center down. The devil did that." Jake hesitated. "One of my favorite verses in the Bible—at least lately—is a reminder that the thief comes only to kill, steal, and destroy. But God ... God comes to give us life—life to the fullest."

A sob worked its way up from Jamie's breaking heart, and she let her head fall into her free hand. "God wouldn't want me anyway, Jake. I'm ... I'm not good like you."

"Good?" He slid his chair closer to hers. "Sweet Jamie, God isn't looking for us to be good or perfect. He's just looking for us to be His. That much I remember." Jake paused and released the hold he had on her hand. Instead, he ran his fingers lightly over her back, comforting her in ways he couldn't even know. "That's why I raised my hand in church today. I couldn't go another minute without telling God that even though I can't remember my past, I want Him to be with me. Today and tomorrow. Forever." He exhaled, and the sound of it breathed peace into her. "I have to tell you, Jamie, the feeling of knowing I'm safe with God was better than anything I could imagine."

Jamie sniffed and peered at him through the spaces in her fingers. "Can I go with you again next week?"

"Of course." He grinned and helped her to her feet. "But right now we have a little girl to play with."

Jake led her to the place where Sierra was struggling with the outside frame of her sandcastle. Jake plopped down next to her, sticking his boot cast out to one side so it wouldn't get too sandy. Then he twirled his finger into one of Sierra's ringlets and kissed the child on the head. "Next week I

get to curl your hair, okay?”

Sierra's eyes lit up. “Really, Daddy?”

Jamie watched the exchange, her mind numb once more. Jake wanted to curl Sierra's hair? Was there a detail Jake missed in that journal of his? And at what point would the details of his past come from his memory, and not the pages of a book?

They finished the sandcastle and then walked along the shore, the three of them, hand in hand. Halfway back to their chairs, Jake stooped down and patted his backside. “Is the princess ready for her horsey ride?”

Sierra clapped her hands and squealed. Then she ran toward Jake and easily propelled herself onto his back.

“Jake—” Jamie felt a rush of concern. He wasn't strong enough to carry Sierra yet. “Be careful.”

But even before she finished the warning, Jake was off, hobbling down the beach with Sierra bounding along on his back, occasionally digging her heels into his side, her little-girl giggle mingling with the sound of the surf. “Faster, horsey! Faster!”

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That night as Jamie fell asleep she realized that the day was a breakthrough in more ways than one. Not only had Jake begun living again, but her time at church and their discussion afterwards had left her vulnerable to the reality of God in a way she'd never guessed would be possible.

The changes from that day ushered in a period of two weeks in which Jake wanted to do everything they'd once done together, everything he'd mentioned that afternoon in the guest room. The temperatures had dipped some, but it was still unusually warm, and together they picnicked and played games and continued to go to church.

Early one cool sunny afternoon they left Sierra with the neighbor and brought the jet ski out to their favorite spot. Jake slipped a plastic bag over his boot cast, and Jamie gave him a gentle ride across the cool harbor,

reminding him the whole time of how the machine operated and how they'd once used it. On the way back to shore, he gently squeezed her waist. "Faster, Jamie. Like we used to ride."

"Are you sure?"

"Absolutely."

Jamie opened the throttle until they were flying across the water. She even cut across a few mild wakes.

"No wonder I loved this!" A cold windy mist brushed across them, and Jake nuzzled his face next to hers, his words filled with exhilaration. "As soon as my cast's off, I get to drive, okay?"

Jamie laughed. "You got it."

And taking the jet ski out became something they did twice more that week, even once when temperatures hovered in the sixties and a light drizzle fell. Jamie didn't care and neither did Jake. The relationship they were rebuilding between them was warmth enough. Jake's memory wasn't exactly returning, but his place in their family was almost what it had once been. At least outside their bedroom.

Jamie credited the Bible and Jake's journal, of course. But each week Pastor Ritchie made her realize that his slow return had to be more than that. It had to be an act of God Himself. And finally, on Jamie's third Sunday, when the pastor asked if any of them wanted a friendship with God, Jamie's hand was one of the first ones up. After a lifetime of running from her husband's God, she'd finally come full circle. And that morning her running led her right into His holy arms, to a place where she and Jake and Sierra could love and serve Him forever. A place she would never have known if Jake hadn't been hurt.

Because of that, Jamie could see a truth playing out in their lives, the one Jake had talked about at the beach after her first Sunday service. God had indeed come to give them life—all of them. And not just any life, but life so full that she was nearly bursting with joy. After all, she had Jake and Sierra and a friendship with God that was only just beginning. One day

soon Jake would have his memory. And even though he was falling in love with her all over again, she could hardly wait for the day when everything about his past would come rushing back. And it would ... because God was making good on His promise—giving them life to the fullest possible measure. And as wonderful as things were now, Jamie knew her life was about to get even more full. It would happen the moment she and Jake could get back to sharing not only their days.

But their nights as well.

## Ses-en-twintig

14 Oktober 2001

Die oomblik toe hulle uit haar motor klim en oor die kerk se parkeerterrein koers kry, wonder Jamie of sy 'n fout gemaak het. Jake se teenwoordigheid by die kerk sal gewis meer as 'n klein opskudding onder die gemeentedelede veroorsaak. Niemand weet van sy amnesie nie en Jamie het nie voor die tyd aan al die aandag gedink nie.

Dit neem net sekondes voordat 'n gesin twee parkeerplekke van hulle af intrek, uit hulle motor klim en na Jake staar. Die man maak hom los uit die groep en gee drie lang treë tot by hulle. "Jake ... ons het jou gemis." Hy kyk na Jamie. "Ek's Tom. Jy moet Jake se vrou wees."

"Ja." Sy glimlag beleefd, maar behou die afstand.

"Jake ..." Tom staan nader en die mans skud blad. Die vreemdeling se oë raak vol tranes. "Ek's ... ek's jammer oor jou vriende. Oor alles. Ons bid vir julle." Hy haal sy skouers op. "Die hele land bid."

Jamie kan Jake se ongemak aanvoel.

Hy versit sy gewig na sy ander been. "Dankie."

Daar is 'n hartseer stilte, toe glimlag die man skeef. "Jy lyk wonderlik."

Sierra kom staan aan Jake se ander kant en neem sy hand. 'n Glimlag verhelder haar gesig en dis duidelik dat sy met die man saamstem. "Pappa word al hoe beter!"

"Dit voel seker goed om uit te kom." Dis 'n sonnige oggend en 'n koel briesie ruis in die bome langs die parkeerterrein.

"Ja." Jake skreef sy oë en kyk na die kerkdeur.

Die gesels het opgedroog en Jamie kan voel hoe die oomblik ongemaklik word. "Verskoon ons ..." Sy kom staan langs Jake en gee 'n klein treetjie na die kerk. "Ons wil nie laat wees nie."

"Natuurlik nie." Die man los Jake se hand en gee hom nog 'n glimlag. "Ons is hier vir jou." Hy kyk na Jamie. "Vir julle almal. Sê net as julle enigiets nodig

het.”

“Dankie,” antwoord Jamie haastig en die man verstaan. Hy knik nog ’n keer en gaan terug na sy gesin toe. Toe hy buite hoorafstand is, leun Jamie nader aan Jake en fluister: “Hulle weet nie van die amnesie nie, nè?”

“Nie tensy jy hulle vertel het nie.”

“Nee.” Sy loop in pas met hom. “Ek het net vir die ouens by die stasie gesê. Ek het nie ’n woord vir enigiemand anders gesê nie.” Jamie dink daaroor na terwyl hulle kerk toe loop. Natuurlik het sy niks gesê nie. Sy ken nie hierdie mense nie; sy ken nie een van hulle nie, want Jake het hierdie deel van sy lewe nie met haar gedeel nie. Hy wou haar nie forseer of druk op haar plaas om sy geloof aan te neem nie. Hy wou haar nie belas met praatjies oor geloof of godsdiens of selfs die Here nie. Tensy dit iets was wat sy wou hê. En selfs al was die mense baie goed vir hulle, al het hulle kos gebring en belowe om vir hulle gesin te bid, was Jamie nie van plan om private besonderhede met hulle te deel nie.

In die vyftien meter tussen hulle en die kerk is daar nog drie ander mense wat wuif of nader kom om Jake te omhels en te sê hulle bid vir hom. Jamie kyk af en toe na Jake, en sy voel hoe hy nader aan haar staan. Dis asof hy aanvoel dat die aandag van hierdie vreemdelinge haar ongemaklik laat voel. Hy onthou dalk nie sy verlede nie, maar sy dagboek het hom baie van haar geleer. Hy moet weet dit kan nie vir haar maklik wees om saam met hom kerk toe te kom nie.

Hy laat sak sy kop en fluister sodat net sy kan hoor. “Is jy oukei?”

Sy lek oor haar onderlip en trek haar skouers op. “Net bietjie op my senuwees.”

Sierra huppel aan sy ander kant, haar hand in syne toegevou. Maar vir die eerste keer sedert die terroriste-aanvalle voel Jamie hoe Jake ook haar hand neem en sy vingers deur hare vleg. Die sensasie maak haar knieë lam. Die bekendheid daarvan stel haar onmiddellik op haar gemak. Vir die eerste keer in meer as ’n maand is sy en Jake en Sierra saam as ’n gesin. En nie eens ’n kerkdienste kan ’n demper op haar vreugde plaas nie.

Hulle gaan in, Jake ’n hinkende tree voor haar. Hy maak asof hy elke persoon onthou wat hom kom groet. “God is altyd getrou,” antwoord hy. Of: “Ek was gedurig bewus van julle gebede.”

Die Jake wat sy onthou, sou beslis sulke stellings maak en dit glo. Maar Jamie weet hy kan nie onthou dat hy dit voorheen gesê het nie. Trouens, gedurende die volgende tien minute lewer Jake ’n toneelspel van Oscar-gehalte, iets wat hy onmoontlik sou kon doen as dit nie was dat hy so ’n studie van sy Bybel en dagboek gemaak het nie.

Terwyl Jake deur nog ’n klompie mense gegroet word, het Jamie die geleentheid om die binnekant van die kerk te bekijk. Dis eintlik nie onaardig nie. Daar is ’n paar baniere waarop Bybelverse geskryf staan, maar geen teken van die beelde of gebrandskilderde glas wat haar as kind so geïntimideer het nie.



Nog mense het hom raakgesien en staan nader, bly oor die kans om Jake te groet en dankie te sê. Hy tel nou onder die stad se bekendste helde. Nie dat hy dit nie voorheen was nie. Maar die posisie wat brandweermanne beklee, het in die weke sedert 11 September van gewone held na sterstatus geklim. Normaalweg sou soveel aandag Jamie ontsenu het, maar solank Jake haar hand vashou, solank hy fier en regop langs haar staan, is sy doodgelukkig. Nadat hulle Sierra Sondagskool toe geneem het, loop hulle na 'n bank taamlik agter in die kerk. Die oomblik toe hulle gaan sit, word hulle deur 'n handvol mense gegroet wat hulle sterkte toewens en hulle verseker dat hulle steeds vir hulle bid. Jamie hou hulle dop, verwonderd oor die lig in hulle oë. Dan tref dit haar. Hulle liefde is nie net vir Jake nie.

Dis vir haar ook.

Alhoewel Jamie nog nooit saam met hom gekom het nie, alhoewel hierdie mense haar nog nooit by die kerk gesien het nie, omhels hulle haar en bied hulle aan om met enigiets te help wat sy nodig het. 'n Paar van hulle het trane in hul oë. Jamie dink weer aan dit wat sy voor 11 September ervaar het. Sierra het haar gevra om saam met hulle kerk toe te kom, en Jamie se belangstelling was geprikkel.

Vandag is sy opnuut nuuskierig. Sy glo dalk nie soos hulle nie, maar sy hoef nie iets teen hierdie mense te hou nie. Hulle liefde vir haar gesin, en selfs vir haar, is duidelik. Die minste wat sy kan doen, is om hulle 'n kans te gee.

'n Ouer vrou kom raak aan Jamie se hand. "Hallo, my kind. Dis so goed om jou uiteindelik te ontmoet."

Die man agter haar glimlag breed vir Jamie. "Onthou, ons is 'n familie. Laat weet asseblief as daar enigiets is wat ons kan doen."

Teen die tyd dat die erediens begin, voel dit vir Jamie of haar kop draai. Haar nuuskierigheid het in verbystering verander. Is dit die mense waarvoor sy bang was? 'n Vriendelike gebou met gawe mense, 'n plek waar sy deur vertroosting omring word? Haar oë rus vir 'n paar oomblikke op haar skoot terwyl sy haar gedagtes probeer organiseer. Dit maak nie saak hoe goed en gaaf die mense hier is nie. Wat saak maak, is die feit dat sy hier sit en 'n bespotting van haarself maak. Sy glo nie in God nie. Veral nie sedert 11 September nie. Dis verkeerd van haar om hier te wees, en as Jake sy geheue herwin het, gaan sy nie weer kom nie.

Sy gaan nie 'n skynheilige wees nie.

Die leraar neem sy plek op die preekstoel in en Jamie staal haar. Dis die gedeelte waar hy een van twee dinge gaan doen. Óf hy gaan met 'n dawerende stem oor die hel begin preek – hulle laat skuldig voel oor elke ydele gedagte en hulle probeer forseer om te glo. Óf hy gaan 'n versiersuikerde boodskap gee oor hoe alles altyd uitwerk vir hulle wat glo.

Jamie blaas haar asem uit. *Vertel dít vir die mense wat in die puin van die World Trade Center begrawe lê.* Sy skuif hierdie gedagtes opsy en werk haar vingers stywer tussen Jake s'n in. Die leraar kan heeldag praat, solank Jake se hand in hare is en Jamie sy warm liggaam langs haar kan voel.

Iemand het 'n nuusblaadjie vir Jamie gegee toe sy ingekom het. Nou vluglees sy oor die lys leraars totdat sy die naam van die man kry wat vandag gaan preek. Ds. Jason Ritchie. Jamie maak die pamflet toe en sit dit langs haar neer. “Goeiemôre en welkom by die First Community Church.” Hy glimlag en iets aan die man herinner haar aan Jake se pa. “As jy vandag as besoeker hier is, is ons bly jy is hier.” Sy oë beweeg oor die gemeente totdat hy Jake en Jamie gewaar. “Ons het iemand baie spesiaals by ons vandag. Baie van julle weet dat Jake Bryan 'n lidmaat hier by ons is. Hy is 'n brandweerman in New York en op 11 September het hy amper sy lewe in die World Trade Center verloor.” Die man bly stil. “Jake is vandag hier, gesond genoeg om saam met ons die Here groot te maak.” Die man se stem klink stram en vir 'n oomblik lyk dit asof hy teen sy trane moet baklei. “Kom ons sê vir hom welkom.”

Rondom hulle begin die mense hande klap en ná 'n paar sekondes begin die een ry ná die ander opstaan totdat die hele gemeente op hulle voete is. 'n Paar van hulle se wange is vol trane. Jamie sit nader aan Jake, diep getref deur so 'n uitstorting van liefde. Is dit die warmte wat sy misgeloop het? Mense, oud en jonk, sien Jake as deel van hulle familie.

Op 'n manier herinner dit haar aan die liefde by die brandweerstasie. Maar hier is dit anders. Hierdie mense is nie lief vir Jake omdat hy 'n brandweerman is nie; hulle is lief vir hom omdat hulle dieselfde geloof aanhang, dieselfde God aanbid. Ongeag of iemand heel of gebroke of onvolmaak is – daar is 'n band tussen hulle wat Jamie eers vanoggend begin verstaan.

Toe die mense weer hulle plekke inneem, begin ds. Ritchie die verhaal van Jesus en 'n paar van sy vriende vertel. Maria, Marta en Lasarus – twee susters en 'n broer wat saamgebly het. Die predikant vertel dat Jesus 'n spesiale vriendskap met hulle drie gehad het. Jesus was dus diep geraak toe Lasarus siek geword en gesterf het.

“Sien,” die predikant praat met 'n helder, sterk stem en Jamie betrap haar dat sy so meegevoer sit en luister dat sy vergeet om wantrouig te wees. “Die dood was nie deel van Christus se plan nie. Dit was nog nooit nie.” Hy bly stil. “Toe Maria en Marta oor hulle dooie broer gehuil het, het Jesus sekerlik daaraan gedink dat die lewe nooit veronderstel was om daardie soort pyn en verlies in te hou nie.” Hy vervolg sagter. “Wat het Marta vir Jesus gesê?” Hy bly stil. “Sy het gesê: ‘Here, as U hier was, sou my broer nie gesterwe het nie.’”

Die predikant loop oor die verhoog en maak oogkontak met die mense aan die ander kant van die kerk. “Is ons nie maar geneig om dieselfde te sê nie? Veral ná die terroriste-aanvalle?” Hy glimlag hartseer voordat hy omdraai en na die ander kant van die podium begin loop. “Ons tier en skree en bal ons vuiste vir die Here en gil deur ons trane. ‘As U maar net hier was, Here ... in die geboue waar U veronderstel was om te wees ... dan sou hierdie goed nie gebeur het nie.’” Die leraar steek vas toe hy die middel van die verhoog bereik. “Maar is dit regtig hoe dit werk?”

Hy keer terug na die verhaal van Maria, Marta en Lasarus, en Jamie hang aan sy lippe. Waarom het sy hierdie verhaal nog nie gehoor nie? En wanneer gaan hy op hulle begin skree? Sy kyk onderlangs na Jake, maar sy volle aandag is by ds. Ritchie – amper asof dit ’n deel van sy lewe is wat hy onthou. Jamie wonder of dit wel die geval is, en of die ure wat hy met sy Bybel deurgebring het, dieselfde sterk geloof geskep het wat hy vergeet het.

Uiteindelik bereik die leraar die gedeelte van die verhaal waar Jesus na die graf toe gaan, die plek waar Lasarus begrawe is. Die gemeente is doodstil terwyl sy oë oor hulle gesigte beweeg. “Jesus was omring deur huilende mense, mense wat Hy geken en liefgehad het, en Hy het voor die graf gestaan van ’n man wat vir Hom soos ’n broer was.” Sy oë vernou. “Wat het Jesus gedoen? Het Hy na hulle gekyk en gesê dit is nie so erg nie?”

Jamie is so nuuskierig oor die einde van die verhaal dat sy skaars kan stilsit, en sy leun vorentoe.

“Nee.” Die leraar glimlag skeef. “Het Hy op hulle gegil, op hulle geskree en gevra waar hulle geloof was? Het Hy hulle uitgetrap omdat hulle treur terwyl Hy belowe het dat alles uiteindelik sal uitwerk?” Hy skud sy kop. “Nee, Jesus het nie een van hierdie dinge gedoen nie. Weet julle wat het Hy gedoen?”

Jamie het nie die vaagste benul nie.

“Hy het gehuil.” Die leraar praat sagter. “Hy het saam met hulle gehuil.” Hy hou sy Bybel in die lug en daar is trane in sy oë. “Soms dink ek Johannes 11:35 is my gunstelingvers in die hele Bybel, want ons lees dat Jesus omgee. As ons huil, huil Hy saam met ons.”

Hy begin weer loop en sluit sy preek af. “Die feit is, Jesus het daardie dag geweet wat Hy doen. Hy het die graf aangespreek en sy vriend beveel om uit te kom, en dis presies wat Lasarus gedoen het.” Ds. Ritchie glimlag. “En alles het gebeur soos dit moet.” Hy gee ’n kyk in Jake se rigting. “Maar dit beteken nie dat ons op hierdie aarde nie meer met die dood te doen kry nie. Sedert die slang sy opwagting in die tuin gemaak het, is die dood deel van ons aardse lewe.” Hy skud sy kop. “Ons moet die verhaal van Jesus en Lasarus eerder as ’n prototipe beskou, ’n illustrasie dat die dood nooit die laaste sê sal hê nie. Nooit nie.”

Die predikant gee nog ’n paar treë, steek vas en kyk na hulle. “Die mense van Staten Island het agt-en-sewentig brandweermanne op 11 September verloor. Sommige van julle het saam met daardie helde gewerk of gelewe. Ander van julle het familie en vriende verloor wat in die World Trade Center gewerk het.”

Toe hy stilbly, is daar die gedempte geluide van mense wat snuif en na snesies soek. Jamie se eie oë is vol trane toe hy vervolg.

“God se boodskap vanoggend is nie dat alles hier op aarde sal uitwerk nie, want dit gaan nie. Die ellendige reuk van die dood is net te sterk onder ons om julle daarvan te probeer oortuig.” Hy hou sy vinger op. “Maar die dood sal nie die septer swaai nie. Vir dié wat in Jesus glo – in ’n God wat saam met jou sal huil – sal die dood nooit die laaste sê hê nie. En dit, liewe vriende, is die hoop

wat ons met ons kan saamneem. Die hoop wat in hierdie spesiale verhaal van Maria, Marta en Lasarus verpak is.”

Toe hy klaar gepraat het, vra hy hulle om hul oë te sluit en hul hoofde te buig. “Elke Sondag doen ek my bes om julle ’n kykie van Jesus te gee, ’n prentjie van die Man wat Hy was, die God wat Hy is. En elke week gee ek julle die kans wat ek julle vandag gee. Die heel belangrikste besluit wat jy ooit sal moet neem, is wat jy omtrent Jesus Christus gaan doen. Kies vandag ’n vriendskap met Jesus, ’n verhouding met die Een wat saam met jou huil wanneer jy seer het, die Een wat weet as jy sy hand neem, sal alles inderdaad op die ou einde uitwerk.”

Jamie se hartklop versnel en haar verweer verkrummel. Sy het nog nooit só aan God gedink nie, Hom nog nooit as ’n vriend gesien wat saam met haar huil en vir haar omgee nie. Toe wys sy haarself op die feit dat sy nie ’n gelowige is nie. Hierdie inligting is goed en wel vir mense soos Jake, maar nie vir haar nie. Nie terwyl die Here haar ouers so vinnig weggeneem het nie; nie terwyl Hy Jake van sy beste vriend beroof het en die dood van so baie onskuldige mense toegelaat het nie. Sy knip haar oë en probeer fokus.

“Ander van julle is reeds gelowiges, maar het nodig om julle opnuut toe te wy, om weer vir die Here ja te sê. Ja, jy glo, ja, jy wil hê Hy moet jou van hierdie punt af verder lei. Ja, jy wil weet jou toekoms is veilig by Hom.” Sy stem is besorgd. “As jy vanoggend in een van hierdie twee kategorieë val, vra ek jou om nou – terwyl almal se oë toe is – jou hand op te steek.” Hy wag ’n oomblik. “Dankie, ek sien jou. En jy daar naby die muur.”

Jamie voel ’n subtiele beweging langs haar, en sy maak haar oë op ’n skrefie oop. Jake het sy hand opgesteek en die trane loop oor albei sy wange. Die prentjie van haar huilende man, sy hand hoog in die lug, gryp Jamie aan die hart. Sy het die skielike drang om ook haar hand op te steek en ja te sê vir ’n God wat by haar sal kom staan en saam met haar sal huil

As sy maar net kon glo.

In plaas daarvan druk sy haar vry hand onder haar been in en byt op haar tande. So ’n God sal haar nie wil hê nie. Nie nadat sy Hom al soveel jare verwerp, geïgnoreer en selfs geweier het om in sy bestaan te glo nie.

Haar gedagtes word deur die predikant se stem onderbreek. “As jy jou hand opgesteek het, nooi ek jou om vorentoe te kom. Hier is mense wat saam met jou wil bid, wat jou wil help verstaan hoe ’n verhouding met God lyk.”

Jake staan op en Jamie voel hoe sy goeie been bewe. Hy raak aan haar skouer en beduie sy moet saam met hom kom, maar hierdie keer skud sy haar kop. Sy kan nie gaan nie, kan dit nie waag om die een ding te doen wat sy haar hele lewe lank gevrees het nie – om haarself aan ’n God oor te gee wat toelaat dat slegte dinge gebeur.

’n Ouer man met ’n naambalkie op sy hemp verskyn in die paadjie langs hulle ry. Hy hou sy hand uit en Jake gaan na hom toe. Hy draai net een maal om en gee haar ’n laaste hartseer kyk. Toe loop hy en die man stadig in die paadjie af totdat Jake by ’n deur regs van die verhoog uitgaan.

Ná die diens kry Jake haar waar hulle gesit het, en die oomblik toe sy in haar man se oë kyk, begin sy bewee. Hy het nie meer die leë, onseker kyk wat sy leer ken het nie. Daar is 'n liefde en diepte in sy oë wat Jamie nou eers beseef voorheen nie daar was nie. Dis 'n uitdrukking wat Jake altyd van ander mense onderskei het, 'n uitdrukking wat mense 'n blik op sy siel gegee het. Die vrede en vreugde wat Jamie nou daar sien, laat haar wonder of daar 'n wonderwerk by die kerk gebeur het. Noudat Jake weer sy geloof in God gevind het, het sy herinneringe dalk ook teruggekom?

Dis eers nadat hulle Sierra gaan haal het en hulle op die strand tuisgemaak het dat Jake met haar praat oor wat by die kerk gebeur het. Hulle het hul strandstoele saamgebring en is besig om dit op die sand oop te vou. Sierra het dadelik haar emmer en grafie gevat en nader aan die branders 'n sandkasteel begin bou.

“Hoekom het jy nie saam met my gekom nie?” Hy tuur uit oor die hawe en klink eerder nuuskierig as seergemaak. Daar het 'n briesie opgesteek, maar dis steeds ongewoon warm vir Oktober.

“Ek kon nie.” Sy blaas haar asem hard uit en kyk na Sierra, merk die kinderlike vreugde op haar gesiggie. “Dit sou nie reg gewees het nie. Nie terwyl ek nie glo nie.” Sy kyk vinnig na hom. “Dit weet jy tog seker, Jake. Het jy nie in jou dagboek gelees hoe ek oor God en die kerk voel nie?” Hy leun nader en neem haar hand in syne, en Jamie se hart sweef. Die eens bekende gebaar is weer besig om natuurlik te word. Vir 'n lang oomblik vryf hy net met sy duim oor die rugkant van haar hand sonder om iets te sê.

“Jy glo, Jamie. Jy het langs my gesit en ek kon voel hoe jy elke woord glo wat die predikant gesê het.”

Jamie weet nie wat om te dink nie. Nee, hy kan dit nie sê nie; hy kan haar nie iets laat erken wat sy nog nie eens teenoor haarself erken het nie. “Ek't ... ek't nog nooit geglo nie.”

Hierdie keer kyk hy na haar. “Ja, jy het. Die jaar by die kamp toe jy jou lewe vir Christus gegee het en vir my gesê het jy het nog nooit so goed gevoel nie.”

“Jake ... ” Die tyd staan stil en Jamie voel hoe die kleur uit haar gesig vloei. “Onthou jy dit?”

Sy oë ontmoet hare. “Ja.” Die onsekerheid in sy oë weerspieël dit wat hy seker in hare gesien het. “Ek bedoel, ek het dit vyf keer in my dagboek gelees. Maar ja ... ek onthou dit.” Hy kyk weg. “Altans, ek dink so.” 'n Paar minute gaan verby terwyl hulle Sierra sit en dophou. Jake trek sy een skoene uit en voetel met sy gesonde voet se tone in die sand. “Dis so goed om hier buite te wees. Om saam met jou en Sierra te wees ... nadat ons saam by die kerk was. Asof dit die regte manier is waarop ons ons Sondag kon deurbring.”

Jamie vou haar arms. Haar hart klop vinnig en onrustig. Sy probeer nog haar asem terugkry van die idee dat Jake se herinneringe dalk begin terugkom, dat hy – al is dit net gedeeltelik – hulle tyd by die somerkamp kan onthou. “Kan ek iets vir jou sê?”

“Natuurlik.” Daar is 'n vreedsame uitdrukking op Jake se gesig.

“Ek’s bang vir die Here.” Uiteindelik ... sy het dit gesê. Sy het aan ’n gedagte uiting gegee waarvan syself tot nou toe nie seker was nie.

“Hoekom?” Jake neem haar hand en soen dit. “Wat is dit van God wat jou bang maak?”

“Hy ...” Sy sit agteroor en byt op haar tande. Trane van woede loop oor haar wange, vanuit ’n plek in haar hart waar sy dit veels te lank opgegaar het. “Hy het my ouers gevat.” Sy maak ’n vuis met haar vry hand en plaas dit oor haar hart. “Ek was net ’n kind, Jake. Maar my ouers het albei verongeluk en ... en nie een van hulle het in God geglo nie.”

Jake luister geduldig sodat sy kan klaar praat.

Sy snuif en probeer tevergeefs die stortvloed trane afvee. “Wat is ek veronderstel om te dink? Dat ’n liefdevolle God sal toelaat dat my ouers sterf en hel toe gaan? Net omdat hulle die fatale fout gemaak het om nie te glo nie?”

Jake wag ’n oomblik en toe hy uiteindelik praat, is daar ’n pynlik bekende teerheid in sy stem. “Het jy al ooit daaraan gedink dat hulle dalk van plan verander het toe hulle daardie nag in die kar gelê het? Die Bybel sê dit maak nie vir God saak wanneer ’n mens na Hom toe kom nie – dit maak net vir Hom saak dát jy wel kom. Ek het dit nou die dag gelees. Dalk het jou ma en pa die Here in daardie laaste oomblikke aangeroop ... dalk is hulle nou, op hierdie oomblik, in die hemel, Jamie. Het jy dit al ooit oorweeg?”

*Dalk is hulle in die hemel?*

Jamie voel lighoofdig, maar die idee pluk aan ’n snaar in haar hart wat nog nooit gespeel is nie. Sê nou Jake is reg? Sê nou haar ouers het daar op die snelweg, in hulle sterwensoomblikke, hulle lewe aan God gegee? En selfs al het hulle nie, sou ’n God wat langs sy vriende staan en huil nie ’n fout met haar ouers gemaak het nie. “Oukei, maar hoekom moes hulle doodgaan? Kan jy my dít sê?”

Jake kyk weer na haar, sy oë teer. “Mense gaan dood, Jamie. Daar is geen waarborge hier op aarde nie. Dis nie God wat jou ouers daardie aand doodgemaak het nie, en dis nie Hy wat die World Trade Center vernietig het nie. Dit was die duiwel se werk.” Jake aarsel. “Een van my gunstelingverse in die Bybel – veral in die laaste tyd – is Jesus se woorde dat die duiwel gekom het om te steel, te slag en uit te roei. Maar God ... God het gekom om vir ons lewe te gee – lewe in oorvloed.”

’n Snik skeur uit Jamie se gebroke hart en sy laat haar gesig in haar vry hand val. “God sal my in elk geval nie wil hê nie, Jake. Ek’s ... ek’s nie ’n goeie mens soos jy nie.”

“’n Goeie mens?” Hy skuif sy stoel nader aan hare. “Liefste Jamie, God verwag nie van ons om goed of volmaak te wees nie. Hy wil net hê ons moet syne wees. Dít kan ek wel onthou.” Jake bly stil en los haar hand om liggies oor haar rug te streel. Die gebaar vertroos haar op ’n manier waarvan hy nie eens bewus is nie. “Dis waarom ek vandag in die kerk my hand opgesteek het. Ek kon nie verder gaan sonder om vir die Here te sê alhoewel ek niks onthou

nie, wil ek by Hom wees. Vandag en môre. Vir altyd.” Hy laat sy asem uit, en die geluid omvou haar in ’n wasige vrede. “Ek moet dit met jou deel, Jamie; om te weet dat ek veilig by die Here is, is beter as enigiets wat ek my kon voorstel.”

Jamie snuif en kyk deur haar vingers na hom. “Kan ek volgende week weer saam met jou gaan?”

“Natuurlik.” Hy grinnik en help haar op. “Maar vir eers is daar ’n klein dogtertjie wat saam met haar ma en pa wil sandkasteel bou.”

Jake lei haar na waar Sierra met die buiterand van die sandkasteel sukkel. Jake gaan sit langs haar met sy gespalkte been so ver moontlik uit die sand. Toe draai hy een van Sierra se lokke om sy vinger en soen die kind op haar kop. “Volgende week moet ek jou hare ’n bietjie indraai, oukei?”

Sierra se gesiggie verhelder. “Rêrig, Pappa?”

Jamie hou hulle dop, opnuut oorbluf. Wil Jake Sierra se hare indraai? Is daar enigiets in sy dagboek wat Jake gemis het? En in watter stadium gaan die besonderhede oor sy verlede uit sy geheue kom en nie uit ’n boek nie?

Hulle bou die sandkasteel klaar en die drie van hulle gaan stap toe hand aan hand op die strand. Op pad terug na hulle stoele hurk Jake en wys na sy rug. “Is die prinses lus vir perdjieri?”

Sierra klap haar handjies en gee ’n gillettjie. Sy hardloop tot by hom en klouter op sy rug.

“Jake ... ” kom dit besorg van Jamie. Hy is nog nie sterk genoeg om Sierra te dra nie. “Wees versigtig.”

Maar sy is nog besig om te waarsku toe Jake met Sierra al bonsend op sy rug teen die strand af galop. Elke nou en dan druk die dogtertjie haar hakke in sy sye, en haar kinderlike laggie meng met die geruis van die branders. “Vinniger, perdjie! Vinniger!”

Net voordat Jamie daardie nag aan die slaap raak, besef sy die dag was in meer as een opsig ’n deurbraak. Nie net het Jake weer begin lewe nie, maar nadat sy in die kerk was en met Jake gesels het, ervaar sy ’n weerloosheid teenoor God wat sy nie gedink het moontlik is nie.

Die veranderinge van daardie dag lui ’n periode van twee weke in waarin Jake alles wil doen wat hulle voorheen saamgedoen het, alles wat hy daardie middag in die gastekamer opgenoem het. Dit begin koeler raak, maar die dae is steeds ongewoon warm, en hulle hou gereeld piekniek en speel speletjies en gaan kerk toe.

Vroeg een koel, sonnige middag laai hulle die waterponie in, los Sierra by die bure en gaan strand toe. Jake trek ’n plastieksak oor sy gespalkte been, en Jamie neem hom vir ’n stadige rit oor die water. Op pad terug strand toe druk hy haar saggies om die middel. “Vinniger, Jamie. Soos altyd.”

“Is jy seker?”

“Honderd persent.”

Jamie gee vet totdat hulle oor die water vlieg. Sy sny selfs deur ’n paar kleiner volgstrome.

“Geen wonder ek was mal hieroor nie!” ’n Koue mistigheid waai oor hulle en hy praat met sy wang teen hare, sy stem uitgelate. “Sodra my spalk afkom, sit ek voor!”

Jamie lag. “Ons maak so.”

Hulle neem die waterponie nog twee keer die week uit, een keer selfs op ’n koue dag toe daar ’n ligte motreëntjie val. Nie Jamie of Jake gee om nie. Daar is genoeg warmte in die verhouding wat besig is om tussen hulle te ontstaan. Tot op hede het Jake se geheue nie regtig teruggekom nie, maar sy plek in die gesin is amper wat dit vroeër was. Buitekant hulle slaapkamer, in elk geval.

Jamie skryf dit toe aan die Bybel en Jake se dagboek. Maar mettertyd laat die leraar haar besef dit moet iets meer wees. Dit moet die Here self wees. En uiteindelik, op Jamie se derde Sondag, toe die predikant vra of enigiemand ’n verhouding met die Here wil hê, is Jamie een van die eerstes wat opstaan. Nadat sy ’n leeftyd van haar man se God weggehardloop het, het sy uiteindelik die kringloop voltooi. Daardie oggend het haar gehardloop haar reguit in sy arms uitgebring, op ’n plek waar sy en Jake en Sierra Hom vir altyd kan liefhê en dien. ’n Plek wat sy nooit sou geken het as Jake nie seergekry het nie.

Die waarheid waarvan Jake daardie eerste Sondag op die strand gepraat het, is besig om voor Jamie se oë te ontvou. God het inderdaad gekom om vir hulle lewe te gee – vir almal van hulle. En nie net ’n gewone lewe nie, maar ’n lewe so vol dat sy oorloop van vreugde. Sy het immers vir Jake en Sierra en nou ook ’n verhouding met God. Jake gaan binnekort sy geheue terugkry. En selfs al is hy besig om van voor af op haar verlief te raak, kan sy amper nie wag vir die dag wanneer alles uit sy verlede gaan terugkom nie. En dit sal ... want God is besig om sy belofte te vervul – om vir hulle lewe in die grootste moontlike oorfloed te gee. Hoe wonderlik haar lewe nou ook al is, Jamie weet dat dit net nog voller gaan raak. Want daar kom ’n tyd wanneer sy en Jake nie net hulle dae sal deel nie.

Maar ook hulle nagte.



# Chapter TWENTY-SEVEN

NOVEMBER 3, 2001

Laura hadn't planned to do anything more than clean Eric's closet.

Clay had taken Josh to play basketball, and Laura had made the decision days ago that Eric's things needed to be gathered and packed away. It wasn't something she wanted to do with Josh around. The first hour passed without anything too emotional. She'd come to grips with the reality of the loss of Eric, and still her greatest grief was that they'd never figured out what had driven them apart. The deep ache that went along with that was something she would hold forever.

But still, his closet needed to be cleaned.

She worked her way through his dirty clothes basket and his dress slacks and ties. Next she began packing a stack of sweaters from his top shelf. Eric didn't get rid of things easily, and Laura uttered a sad laugh as she lifted the dusty clothes from the shelf and placed them in the box. He hadn't worn the sweaters since before Josh was born, but he'd saved them anyway.

Now she would pack them up and give them to the local rescue mission.

She was pulling off the last sweater when something white slipped from the shelf and drifted to the floor. Her eyes followed it, and as she leaned over, she saw that it was a white envelope with nothing written on the outside. Laura dropped the sweater in the box, picked up the envelope, and lifted the flap.

Inside was a greeting card she'd never seen before. Her heartbeat quickened as she pulled it out. Why would Eric keep it here, beneath his sweaters? Was it from some secret lover, someone Laura had never known about? Were her fears in the months before September 11 justified, after all? A part of her screamed to put the card back in the envelope and throw it away, never look at what her husband had kept hidden here in his closet.

But she had to know, and she turned it over so she could see the front. A blue and white sky was punctuated by a single word printed across the background. *Forever ...*

Laura clenched her teeth and stared at the card. Then without waiting another second, she opened it. The rest of the printed message read simply, "Forever I'll remember you."

Beneath that was something Eric had written. It was dated, and suddenly Laura's breath caught in her throat. She stared at the date, not believing what it said. October 15, 1989. It was the birth date of their daughter. The birth date and date of death. Her eyes fell to the words Eric had written, and through eyes clouded by tears, she began to read.

*Hello, darling daughter ... this card is from your daddy....*

A sob escaped Laura's throat, and she dropped in slow motion to the floor of Eric's closet. He'd written their stillborn daughter a card? How had he cared that much about the child without ever saying so? She covered her eyes with her free hand and waited until she could see again. Then she pressed her fingers against her eyes and blinked back the tears. *God ... how come he never showed me this?*

No answer flashed in her mind. She brought the card closer to her face and continued reading.

*Your mommy misses you so much, and I know it would only hurt her if I talked about this. But you were my daughter, sweetheart, and I have to write to you now. I want to give you a name, honey. The name your mom and I had talked about before you were born. That way I'll always know that you were real ... and that you were part of my life.* Laura closed her eyes for a moment and held back the sobs. Tears would only make it harder to read. She found her place again and continued.

*And so I want to name you Sarah. Sarah Anne. And one day when we meet again in heaven, I'll see you and know you ... and call you by name. I can't wait until then, to finally get to hold you for the first time. I love you, Sarah. Like the card says, I'll remember you forever. Love, Daddy.*

Laura read Eric's words again, and slowly she closed the card and clutched it to her heart, and in the silence of the closet, she could almost hear God crying. The sobs came then, waves of them. He had cared, after all. But he'd hidden his feelings for more than a decade, buried them beneath a stack of dusty old sweaters.

Why hadn't Eric told her how he'd grieved the loss of their daughter? He'd been upset the first day, but after that he'd never talked about her again. How could she have known that he'd named the child Sarah? The name they'd agreed on weeks before her birth. Years had passed before Laura got pregnant again, and even then Eric never brought up the daughter they'd lost. But here ... now ... there was no doubting the fact that Eric had grieved her loss. Grieved it from a place he hadn't let anyone see even one time since then.

The truth created a loss Laura had never known. If only she'd found the card before Eric died, they could've used it to walk their way back to the love they'd known before. They could've talked about the real issues at the counseling sessions, how the loss of Sarah Anne had made Eric doubt God and family and love and everything good about life. Somewhere deep inside him, Eric had cared. He'd cared more than he'd ever let on ... more than even he remembered.

But now ... now it was too late, and that fact was almost more than Laura could bear.

The minutes passed, and suddenly something dawned on her, something that made her smile despite her tears, despite the cavernous loss she felt deep in her heart. Today ... somewhere on the streets of heaven ... Eric was doing the thing he'd wanted so badly to do.

He was holding Sarah Anne.

**Sewe-en-twintig**

3 November 2001

Laura was nie van plan om meer te doen as om Eric se kas uit te pak nie. Clay het Josh kom haal om basketbal te speel, en Laura het 'n paar dae tevore besluit Eric se goed moet uitgesorteer en weggepak word. Dis nie iets wat sy wil doen wanneer Josh by is nie. Die eerste uur verloop sonder enigiets emosioneels. Sy het die realiteit van Eric se dood begin verwerk, en haar grootste seer is steeds die feit dat sy nooit sal weet waarom hulle uitmekaargedryf het nie.

Hoe dit ook al sy, Eric se kas moet uitgepak word.

Sy werk deur alles in sy wasgoedmandjie, sy netjiese langbroeke en dasse. Toe haal sy 'n stapel hemde uit sy boonste rak. Eric het 'n sentimentele streep gehad, en Laura gee 'n hartseer laggie toe sy die stowwerige klere uit die kas haal en dit in die kartondoos sit. Hy het van die hemde en truië voor Josh se geboorte laas gedra.

Nou sal sy dit wegpak en vir die plaaslike reddingsmissie gee.

Sy is besig om die laaste hemp uit te haal toe iets wits grond toe fladder. Toe sy buk, sien sy dit is 'n skoon, wit koevert. Laura laat val die trui in die boks, tel die koevert op en vou dit oop.

Binnekant is 'n kaartjie wat sy nog nooit gesien het nie. Haar hart klop vinniger toe sy dit uithaal. Waarom sou Eric dit onder sy hemde en truië gebêre het? Van wie was dit – 'n geheime minnares, iemand waarvan Laura nooit geweet het nie? Is dit moontlik dat haar vrese in die maande voor 11 September gegrond was? Iets in haar gil dat sy die kaartjie weer in die koevert moet steek en dit moet weggooi, dat sy nie moet kyk na wat haar man hier in sy kas weggesteek het nie.

Maar sy móét weet, en sy draai die kaartjie om sodat sy die voorkant kan sien. 'n Blou hemel met twee woorde op die voorgrond. *Vir altyd ...*

Laura byt op haar tande en staar na die kaartjie. Toe staal sy haar en maak dit oop. Die res van die gedrukte boodskap lees bloot: “Ek sal jou vir altyd onthou.”

Daaronder is 'n boodskap wat Eric geskryf het. Dis gedateer en skielik sukkel Laura om asem te haal. Sy staar in ongeloof na die datum. 15 Oktober 1989. Dit was hulle dogtertjie se geboortedatum. Die dag waarop sy gebore is en dood is. Haar oë val op die woorde wat Eric geskryf het en al is haar oë vol tranes, begin sy lees.

*Hallo, liefste dogtertjie ... hierdie kaartjie is van jou pappa ...*

'n Snik ontsnap uit Laura se bors en sy sak op die vloer voor die kas neer. Het hy vir hulle doodgebore dogtertjie 'n kaartjie geskryf? Hoe kon hy so baie vir die kindjie omgee sonder om dit ooit te sê? Sy plaas haar een hand oor haar oë en wag totdat sy weer kan sien. Toe druk sy met haar vingers teen haar oë. *Here ... hoekom het hy dit nooit vir my gewys nie?*

Sy kry nie 'n antwoord nie. Sy hou die kaartjie nader aan haar gesig en lees verder.

*Jou mamma mis jou so baie, en ek weet dit sal haar net seermaak as ek hieroor praat. Maar jy was my dogtertjie, liefste, en ek kan nie anders as om*

*vir jou te skryf nie. Ek wil vir jou 'n naam gee, my liefjie. Die naam waaroor ek en jou ma voor jou geboorte gepraat het. So sal ek altyd weet dat jy regtig met ons was ... en dat jy deel van my lewe was. Laura maak haar oë toe vir 'n oomblik en probeer haar snikke inhou. Trane sal dit net moeiliker maak om te lees. Sy kry haar plek en begin weer lees.*

*Daarom wil ek jou Sarah noem. Sarah Anne. En eendag wanneer ons in die hemel weer bymekaar is, sal ek jou sien en jou ken ... en jou op jou naam noem. Ek kan nie wag om jou vir die eerste keer in my arms te hou nie. Ek is lief vir jou, Sarah. Soos die kaartjie sê: Ek sal jou vir altyd onthou. Liefde, Pappa.*

Nadat Laura die kaartjie weer gelees en stadig toegemaak het, hou sy dit teen haar hart, en in die stilte van die kas ervaar sy dat die Here saam met haar treur. Uiteindelik gee sy haar oor aan die huil. Hy het dus tog omgee. Maar hy het sy gevoelens vir meer as 'n dekade weggesteek, dit onder 'n stapel stowwerige ou hemde begrawe.

Waarom het Eric haar nie vertel hoe hy oor hulle dogtertjie getreur het nie? Ná sy aanvanklike ontsteltenis die eerste dag het hy nooit weer oor haar gepraat nie. Hoe moes sy geweet het dat hy haar Sarah genoem het? Die naam waarop hulle weke voor die geboorte ooreengekom het – dit was jare voordat Laura weer swanger geraak het, en selfs toe het Eric nooit na die kind verwys wat hulle verloor het nie. Maar nou ... daar bestaan geen twyfel dat Eric oor haar gerou het nie. Iewers in sy binneste waar hy niemand ooit toegelaat het nie.

Die waarheid kom saam met 'n gevoel van verlies wat Laura nog nooit geken het nie. As sy die kaartjie maar net voor Eric se dood ontdek het, kon hulle dit gebruik het om by die liefde uit te kom wat daar eens tussen hulle was. Hulle kon tydens die baie beradingsessies by die wortel van die probleem uitgekom het. Dit was Sarah Anne se dood wat gemaak het dat Eric aan God en die gesin en liefde begin twyfel het. Iewers in sy binneste het Eric wel omgee. Hy het meer omgee as wat hy ooit laat blyk het ... meer as wat hy self onthou het.

Maar nou is dit te laat, en die besef is amper meer as wat Laura kan verduur. 'n Paar minute gaan verby, en dan is dit asof daar 'n besef by haar daag, iets wat haar ondanks haar trane, ondanks die gapende verlies, laat glimlag. Eric se droom het waar geword.

Want uiteindelik is hy by Sarah Anne.

# Chapter TWENTY-EIGHT

NOVEMBER 4, 2001

The first flashback hit a week later.

It was three o'clock in the morning the day that Jake and Jamie and Sierra had planned to attend a spaghetti dinner at the fire station. One minute Jake had been sound asleep, and the next he was thrust in the middle of a moment so chaotic and terrifying, it took his breath away.

He was scrambling down an endless stairwell in some high-rise building, when suddenly he began to tumble. The fall happened in slow motion, and as soon as he hit the steps, a hand reached out to help him. He took it, and when he looked up, he was suddenly staring into his own face, the image of himself in a firefighter's uniform.

"Help!" He shouted long and hard, and the sound of his own voice woke him up.

Then just as quickly, the image disappeared.

Jake sat straight up in bed, his heart racing. *God ... what just happened to me? What was that, and where does it fit into my past?* He licked his lips and stared at his hands. His fingers were shaking, but before he could beg God to settle his heart, the door flew open and Jamie raced into the room.

"Jake ... what is it?" Her face was pale as she made her way to the side of his bed and sat down. Her breaths came fast and anxious as she searched his eyes. "You screamed."

*Calm me, God ... help me make sense of whatever that was.* He took Jamie in his arms and held her. She was terrified. He could feel her heartbeat pounding hard against his chest. "It's okay ... it was just a dream."

She went utterly still and pulled back far enough to see him. "A dream ... or a flashback?"

He knew the answer immediately, but he didn't want to frighten her.

Especially when the image still didn't make sense to him. He locked eyes with hers and exhaled as he caught his breath. "It was a flashback, I think."

"Dr. Cleary said they might come in the early morning. Before you woke up."

Jake nodded. "It was very, very real."

"Well ..." Jamie studied his face. "What was it? What'd you remember?"

"I was in a building ... with a stairwell that seemed to go on forever."

"The World Trade Center." Jamie's voice was quietly urgent.

They'd both waited so long for this moment that he knew better than to keep her guessing. He took a slow breath and finished detailing what he'd seen. "The strange thing was that I wasn't the fireman, Jamie. I mean, I was the fireman, but I was someone else too. Someone who had fallen on the stairs. When the firefighter helped me up, I looked at him and it was me."

Jamie's shoulders fell a bit, and the panic faded from her face. "Maybe it wasn't a flashback. Maybe it was a dream."

"Maybe." Jake ran his fingers lightly down Jamie's bare arms. In a handful of seconds, the idea of whether he'd had a flashback or a dream seemed irrelevant. Instead, all that mattered was her nearness, the way she looked sitting beside him on the bed in an oversized T-shirt, the moonlight glistening in her hair. "I'm sorry I woke you."

"It's okay." She swallowed, and the space between them began to disappear. "Jake ... ?"

"Yes." His voice was healing, and here in the darkness it sounded almost normal. Like Jake assumed normal would sound if he could remember his past.

"Hold me, Jake. Will you please?" She hung her head, clearly embarrassed by the raw desire in her voice.

Without a bit of hesitation, Jake took her in his arms and stroked her back, soothing away the weeks of separation. Though they'd gotten closer

those past few weeks, they'd never had the near occasion to kiss the way they had that one time. But here, in the quiet dark of the night, Jake didn't care if he couldn't remember being married to her. She was beautiful and loving, and they'd obviously spent a lifetime together. He whispered against her neck. "Jamie, you're beautiful. Do you know that?"

"Mmmmm." She pressed herself against him, and his desire for her doubled. Her voice was thick with passion as she whispered near his ear. "I miss you more each day. This part of you."

She drew back and their eyes locked. Before he could ask himself whether it was right or wrong, before he could consider the fact that he'd promised to keep his distance until he remembered her, Jake brought his face to hers. Slowly ... in a way that seemed as natural as the feel of her in his arms, their lips met, and Jake kissed her the way he'd been dying to do for weeks. "Jamie ..." He was breathless when he came up for air. "What you do to me."

He studied her and realized there were tears in her eyes. Her mouth opened as though she wanted to ask him something, but instead she worked her fingers up along the tender places on his burned face and through his hair. The sensation felt unbelievable, and it lit a fire deep within him, a fire that could only be quenched one way.

"I love you, Jake." She drew him to her, kissing him again and letting her tears brush against his face. "I love you."

An impatience began to build, and suddenly he wanted her more than he wanted his next breath. He gently pulled her closer, drawing her down onto the bed beside him. "I love you ... Jamie."

She kissed him, balancing over him, not quite letting herself be swept away on this wonderful wave of passion. When she drew back she studied his face, knowing that he saw a fear in her eyes that hadn't been there before. Her voice was only a pinched whisper. "Do you love me ... because you remember?"

His eyes closed, and he could feel her pulling away from him,



straightening. *No, God ... don't let her ask this. We belong together ...*

*In all yours ways acknowledge Me, and I will direct your paths, My son.*

The words sounded on the front porch of his heart and echoed through his being. Jake had no doubts. The still small voice was from God. And if this wasn't the time for Jamie and him, then one day soon their time would come. He sat up and tried to still the flames within him. "Jamie ... is it that important?" He opened his eyes and found her watching him, studying him. "I love you. I loved you before, and I love you now. Isn't that all that matters?"

She sat back up, her body close to his, and clasped her hands. Then she stared at the wedding ring on her finger. "No." Her eyes raised to his. "I don't want to reinvent what we used to have." She tilted her head, her tone laced with a raw pain that cut at Jake's heart. "I want the real thing, Jake. As badly as I want you right now, I want all of it." She ran her fingertips beneath her eyes. "All of you."

He leaned close and with slow, tender movements he kissed her once more. When he pulled back he wanted her so badly, he could barely stop himself from lying to her, from telling her that yes, he did remember. But instead he took her hands in his and bowed his head so their faces came together in a different way. "Pray with me, will you, Jamie?"

Slowly, his passion was replaced with something richer, something etching itself in the walls of his soul. "Pray that whatever woke me up was a flashback, and that it's only the beginning. Because I do want you. But you're right. I want to remember everything else first."

There in the dark of the guest room they prayed for God's mercy and blessing. Jamie finished the prayer in words that were both simple and sweet. "Bring him home, Lord ... all the way home. Please."

At just after four o'clock that afternoon, they took the ferry across the harbor and went by cab to his fire station. Eight men and their families had gathered there, all waiting for him when he walked in.

Jake wondered if he'd ever been more nervous in all his life.

Because of the strange dream or flashback that had happened earlier, he sort of hoped that seeing the station would jar another series of memories. The same way reading his Bible and journal had seemed to restore his soul. Instead, nothing about it looked the least bit familiar, and when they went inside, he felt like he was back at church all over again.

Men he didn't know began to hug him and shake his hand; women who must have been their wives had tears in their eyes, and they hung on to him as though they were afraid to let go. "Jake, we're so glad you made it!" And "We've missed you, man. When're you coming back?"

Captain Hisel was there, and Jake was grateful. At least he looked familiar, even if it was only because of their visit in the hospital. "Hey, Jake ... you're healing up."

"Yep." Jake shook the captain's hand and managed a smile. He glanced about the room looking for Jamie. Out of the crowd of people at the station, she and Sierra were his only friends, and he hated being apart from them.

"How's it going with your memory?"

"Slow." Jake leveled his gaze at the captain. "I picked up a lot from my journal and the notes in my Bible. But I can't really say I've started remembering again."

Captain Hisel waved his hand around. "Any of this look familiar?"

"No." Jake frowned and shook his head. "Not a bit." He stuck his hands in the pocket of his jeans. They were loose on him, maybe a quarter inch too long, but that wasn't surprising. Jamie said he'd probably lost fifteen pounds since the accident. He glanced at the wall behind Captain Hisel and saw a series of photos. Men, all of them firefighters, with two dates listed beneath. The second date for every man was September 11, 2001. Jake took a step closer and scrutinized the faces. "Those our guys?"

The captain worked the muscles in his jaw. "Every one."

Jake hadn't kept up with the news. It meant nothing to him, since he

had no memory of fighting fires or even working in New York City. Besides, he'd been too busy reading his Bible and journal to care what the papers said. But here, now, he was touched beyond words at the enormous tragedy that had happened to the New York Fire Department that awful Tuesday morning. He dropped his tone a notch and stared at the captain. "How's everyone handling it?"

"It's crazy, JB." Captain Hisel's voice cracked, and he stared at the floor for a moment. When he found his voice, he lifted his chin and met Jake's eyes. "The department had to create its own Funeral Desk." He ran his hand over his balding head. "Three hundred and forty-three men. Funerals every day, sometimes three and four a day. One Saturday there were two dozen. Two dozen funerals, JB. Can you believe it?"

Jake wasn't sure what to say or how to react, but he was struck by the pain he saw in the captain's eyes. The anxiety within him made him better understand Dr. Cleary's orders to keep his life as simple as possible until he remembered. Should he hug the captain? Maybe utter something about the losses being too bad? He didn't know, and so he merely put his hand on the captain's shoulder and said nothing.

Captain Hisel sniffed and raised his chin some. "Not just that, but ever since the attacks we've become famous." He shrugged. "I mean we couldn't shut our doors the first few weeks after September 11. Everybody and their brother was coming by, bringing us cookies or meals or flowers. Telling us how wonderful we were, sometimes even getting our autographs."

The captain huffed. "You know how that made us feel?" He didn't wait for a response. "Like garbage, that's how. Because we should've died up there in those buildings right beside the men we lost. Heck, we weren't the heroes, JB. We were lucky. The guys who died in the buildings—they're the heroes, you know?"

Jake nodded, again not sure what to say. Clearly the captain needed to talk to him, to catch him up on all that had happened. But without a past to anchor it to, it was almost like hearing a news report. Jake was saddened,

horrified even. But he wasn't personally touched, not the way Captain Hisel would've expected him to be.

The captain studied him again. "You look different, JB. Something about your face."

A few people at church had said that as well, and Jake gave the captain the same answer he'd given them. "Must be the burns."

"You're thinner."

"Yeah ..." Jake gave the captain a crooked smile. "I guess that's not the worst thing."

"You talked to Sue since you've been up and about?"

"Sue?"

"Sue Henning." The captain looked baffled for an instant, then a knowing look filled his face. "I keep forgetting about your memory." He gave a sad chuckle. "Sue was married to Larry. Your best friend."

Suddenly, Jake remembered the journal entries, the times when he'd written about Larry and Sue and Katy, how close he'd felt to Larry and how deeply he'd cared for the man's family. His eyes darted to the wall of photos once more until he found the one that read *Larry Henning, August, 23, 1968—September 11, 2001*. The man was stockier than Jake imagined him, his full face taken up almost entirely by his smile.

He remembered something from his journal, something he'd written about Larry. *The two of us will always be best friends, looking out for each other at the station and in our marriages. Even in our love for God. Larry Henning is the closest God ever came to giving me a brother.*

Jake searched the man's eyes. *Why, God ... why isn't Larry even a little familiar. And how come I can't remember the good times we shared.* A deep sorrow welled up inside Jake, not the type of sorrow that came with missing someone you've loved and lost. But the sorrow of a distant, incalculable loss. Because seeing the smiling eyes of the dead stranger, Jake believed that somehow if Larry were there in the room at that moment, the two of them would have found a way to hit it off.

Even if his memory never returned.

Jake let the thought pass as he took a step back and faced Captain Hisel again. "How's she handling it?"

"She's a mess. I asked her if she'd talked to Jamie, and she said not since September 11, that the three of you needed your space. Because of the memory thing."

Jake nodded. "Can you do me a favor?"

"Anything, JB ... you know that."

"Give me Sue's address ... directions to her house. Jamie and I want to drop by with Sierra and let her know we care."

Captain Hisel narrowed his eyes and stared hard into Jake's, almost as though he were looking for the man who lived somewhere within him, the one who would remember all that the guys on Engine 57 and Ladder 96 had been through together over the years. "That's you, right, JB? Even though you can't remember?"

The question jolted Jake's confidence and made him want to run from the firehouse. What did the captain mean? Of course he was Jake Bryan ... who else would he be? He managed a weak chuckle. "Don't say things like that, Captain. You scare me."

The captain waved a hand over his head as though he were chasing away an errant fly. "I'm sorry. It's just ... it's too weird talking to you about Larry and seeing in your eyes that you don't remember him." The captain paused and gave him that same look, the one where his eyes bunched up and narrowed to mere slits. "You really don't remember, do you, JB?"

"No." He caught a half breath and backed up a step. He needed to find Jamie and Sierra. Now. "I really don't." Voices sounded in the next room, and Jake recognized one of them as Jamie's. "Hey, good talking to you. I've got to find Jamie."

Jake made his way into the next room. Sierra saw him first, and her eyes lit up as she broke away from Jamie and ran to him. Though he still had the cast on his foot, Jake had learned how to brace himself on one leg

and capture his daughter as she jumped into his arms. He wished Captain Hisel could see him now. Of course he was Jake Bryan—there was no way his daughter would've loved him like that if he weren't.

The rest of the evening he stayed by Jamie's side, keeping his conversation to one- and two-word answers. He avoided any discussion about his memory. When it was time to go, Jake took from the captain a slip of paper with directions to Sue and Larry's house. In the cab on the way back to the ferry, Jake pulled them from his pocket and showed them to Jamie.

"I think we should stop by and see Sue."

Jamie stared at the slip of paper and gave him a sad sigh. "I know how to get there, Jake. We were close friends before September 11."

Jake thought about that for a moment. It was only seven o'clock, but Sierra had fallen asleep between them, and her tiny body lay nestled against his side. "If we were so close, why haven't we been over to see her yet?"

"You weren't ready."

Jamie's answer was a bit too quick, and Jake picked up on the fact. "There's more to it, isn't there?"

Pain filled Jamie's eyes. "I've called her a few times, but she's never able to talk." She looked at Jake. "Last time I talked to Sue, we were hoping that Larry was only missing. That somehow they'd find him in the rubble." Jamie lifted a single shoulder. "Now ... now we know the truth. He's dead, and, Jake ..." her voice broke, "I'm not sure if I can handle seeing her. Because ..." She sniffed twice, and Jake slipped his arm around her.

"It's okay, honey. Tell me ... I'm here." She rubbed her thumb and forefinger into her brow and shook her head. Then her eyes met his again, and for the first time he could see the type of terrifying fear that he'd written about in his journals.

"Jake ... that could've been you. But since it wasn't, I didn't know if

Sue would even want to see me. I mean ...” She tossed her hands up. “I know God was there with Larry. He was there with you. I believe that. But still ... I *have* my husband, and she doesn't. Looking at each other and admitting that, well, it'll be the saddest thing I've ever done.”

Jake waited a moment until Jamie had control of her emotions again. Then he kissed her gently on her temple and spoke in a voice that sounded almost healed. “I'll help you through it.”

“Okay.” She gave a single nod, her face brushing against his burned face.

The gesture caused a slice of pain across his tender cheek, but he didn't care. Especially not now, when all he wanted was to see Jamie through the next few hours. And pay his respects to the wife of his best friend.

They were quiet on the ferry ride back to Staten Island, and Jamie left to find a restroom. Jake pulled Sierra onto his lap and smiled at her. “You look sleepy.”

“Mmmhmm.” She yawned and rested her forehead against his. “Butterfly kisses?”

Jake refused the faint sense of panic that tried to seize him. He kissed Sierra's nose and winked at her. “Okay, silly girl.”

“Well, Daddy ...” Sierra angled her face expectantly. “Do it then.”

He hesitated, his heart pounding twice as hard as before. “You start.”

With that he fooled her, and her eyes sparkled. “Okay.” She brought her nose to his and rubbed it back and forth a few times. Then she turned her face a few inches and blinked her eyelashes several times against his cheek. He caught on within a few seconds and did the same thing, blinking his lashes against hers.

“You know what, Daddy?”

“What?”

“That's a favorite thing for me and you.”

“Yes, Sierra.” He pulled her head to his chest and clung to her,

grateful that he'd lived, grateful that he still had a chance to love this darling child. "I'm glad too."

"Are we going to Katy's house tonight?"

For an instant Jake had to search his mind before he remembered. Katy was Sue and Larry's little girl. "Yes ... just for a little while."

Sierra sat up so she could see his eyes. "Did Katy's daddy get hurt in that big fire? The one with the airplanes in the building?"

Jake felt his heart sink. The child didn't know, and he had to tell her. They could hardly stop by Sue's house and have Sierra asking Katy where her daddy was. "Honey, I have to tell you something very sad about Katy's daddy."

Jamie returned then and took a seat beside Jake. "What's the conversation?"

Jake gave her a knowing look. "Sierra was asking about Katy's daddy. Whether he got hurt in the bad fire, the one with the airplanes in the building."

"Oh." Jamie inhaled sharply through her nose and looked at the dark fall sky for a moment. Then she shifted her gaze to Jake, and her eyes pleaded with him. "You tell her, okay?"

Jake turned back to Sierra. "Katy's daddy died, honey. He went into that bad fire to save people, but he never made it back out."

Sierra's expression filled with fear, and then as though she'd suddenly sprung a leak, her innocent eyes filled with tears. "You mean ... he's never coming home again?"

"No." Jake placed his hands on his daughter's shoulders and searched her face. "But we know where Katy's daddy is, don't we?"

"Yes." A huge tear rolled down Sierra's nose and plopped on Jake's jeans. "He's with Jesus."

"And that isn't so bad, is it?"

"No." Sierra sniffed. "But Katy doesn't have a daddy anymore."

"Aw, sweetheart, yes she does. It's just that her daddy lives in



heaven.”

Sierra thought about that for a minute. “I don't ever want you to live in heaven, okay, Daddy. Not until I go there too.”

“I won't.” Jake chose his words carefully. If September 11 had taught him one thing, it was that life held no guarantees. He exchanged a meaningful look with Jamie and continued. “But if Jesus has a job for me to do—like saving some people in a fire—and in the middle of it He tells me to come home to heaven. I'll have to go. You know that, right? Just like Katy's daddy.”

Sierra tilted her head, and her golden curls fell gently across her pink sweater. “You mean Jesus told Katy's daddy to come home while he was helping people?”

“Yes.” Jake gave a firm nod of his head. “That's exactly what happened.”

“Oh.” She wiped her nose. “I still hope Jesus doesn't do that to you, Daddy. Because I want you with me forever.”

Jake kissed his daughter's nose and reached next to him for Jamie's hand. “I want that, too, honey. Forever and ever.”

The ferry pulled up at the dock, and the three of them made their way to the car. Ten minutes later they were standing on the front porch of another house Jake didn't recognize. A pretty blonde opened the door, and when she saw them, her hand flew to her mouth. The tears were instant for both her and Jamie.

“Jake ... Jamie ...” She opened her arms, and Jake, Jamie, and Sierra met her in a group hug. There, for nearly a minute, the three of them embraced, weeping for the loss of a man Jake was desperate to remember.

Sierra squirmed her way free of the circle, and Jake looked up to see her tug on Sue's sleeve. “Mrs. Henning ...”

Sue sniffed hard, and through her tears she smiled at Sierra. “Yes, honey.”

“Can I go play with Katy?”

“Yes, doll. Katy's upstairs.”

The group of them watched Sierra scamper inside, and then Jamie turned to the blonde woman. “I’m so sorry, Sue ... I’ve tried to call.” Jamie’s voice was muffled in Sue’s T-shirt.

“No ... it’s my fault. I didn’t think I could look at Jake without ...” She pulled back and stared at Jake as a series of sobs overtook her. “W—w—without seeing Larry too.”

They went inside and spent an hour listening to Sue, letting her cry and at the end praying with her. The only time Sue smiled was when she was remembering Jake and Larry together, and again when she found out that Jamie had become a Christian. “God is still so good ...” Sue dabbed at her tears. “He’s been with me even more since Larry’s been gone. I can feel Him, every day, every minute.”

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Sometime after one in the morning, Jake was struck by the same series of vivid images he’d seen the other night. He shot to a sitting position, his breathing hard and fast, but he didn’t scream or cry out in fear. He had no doubt this time—the vision was a flashback, and not a crazy dream.

He was rushing down an endless stairwell—maybe helping someone who needed assistance, as Jamie had guessed. But then he’d fallen down the steps, and someone had reached a hand out to help him. It was only natural that another firefighter would be the one to pull him to his feet, but he would’ve expected the man to be Larry or one of the other guys from the station.

That was the part of the flashback that simply didn’t make sense. The part that kept Jake up an extra hour that night trying to figure it out. Because the face of the firefighter belonged to someone Jake definitely recognized, but it wasn’t Larry or anyone else, for that matter.

It belonged to him.

# Agt-en-twintig

4 November 2001

Die eerste terugflits kom 'n week later.

Dis drieuur die oggend, die dag waarop Jake en Jamie en Sierra na 'n spaghetti-aand by die brandweerstasie genooi is. Die een oomblik is Jake nog vas aan die slaap, die volgende bevind hy hom in 'n oomblik so chaoties en angswekkend dat hy nie asem kry nie.

Hy is besig om in 'n eindelose trapkuil in die een of ander hoë gebou af te hardloop toe hy skielik begin val. Dit gebeur in stadige aksie, en toe hy die trap tref, word daar 'n hand uitgesteek om hom te help. Hy neem dit, en toe hy opkyk, kyk hy skielik in sy eie gesig vas, die beeld van homself in 'n brandweeruniform.

“Help!” Hy gil lank en hard, en die geluid van sy eie stem maak hom wakker. Toe is die beeld weg.

Jake sit regop in sy bed en sy hart klop gejaagd. *Here ... wat het sopas met my gebeur? Wat was dit, en waar pas dit in my verlede in?* Hy lek oor sy lippe en kyk na sy hande. Sy vingers bewe, maar voordat hy God kan smeek om hom rustig te maak, vlieg die deur oop en storm Jamie by die kamer in.

“Jake ... wat is dit?” Haar gesig is bleek toe sy naderloop en by hom op die bed kom sit. Sy haal vinnig asem terwyl sy ondersoekend in sy oë kyk. “Jy het geskree.”

*Kalmeer my, Here ... help my asseblief om sin te maak van wat dit ook al was.* Hy neem Jamie in sy arms en hou haar vas. Sy is angsbevange en hy kan haar hart teen sy bors voel klop. “Dis oukei ... dit was net 'n droom.”

Sy raak doodstil en lig haar gesig na hom. “'n Droom of 'n terugflits?”

Hy weet onmiddellik wat die antwoord is, maar wil haar nie ontstel nie. Veral nie terwyl die beeld nog steeds nie vir hom sin maak nie. Hy hou haar oë gevange en blaas sy asem stadig uit. “Dit was 'n terugflits, dink ek.”

“Dr. Cleary het gesê dit sou dalk vroeg in die oggend kom. Voor jy wakker word.”

Jake knik. “Dit was baie, baie realisties.”

“En ...” Jamie bestudeer sy gesig. “Wat was dit? Wat het jy onthou?”

“Ek was in die gebou ... in 'n vreeslike diep trapkuil.”

“Die World Trade Center.” Daar is 'n sagte dringendheid in Jamie se stem.

Hulle albei het so lank vir hierdie oomblik gewag dat hy van beter weet as om haar in die duister te hou. Hy trek sy asem in en vertel verder wat hy gesien het. “Die vreemde ding is net ... ek was nie die brandweerman nie, Jamie. Ek bedoel, ek was die brandweerman, maar ek was ook iemand anders. Iemand wat oor die trappe gestruikel het. Toe die brandweerman my ophelp, het ek na hom gekyk, en dit was ek.”

Jamie se skouers val 'n aks, en die paniek verdwyn uit haar gesig. “Dalk was dit nie 'n terugflits nie. Dalk was dit 'n droom.”

“Dalk.” Jake streel met sy vingers liggies oor Jamie se kaal arms. Binne enkele sekondes is dit vir hom irrelevant of hy 'n terugflits of 'n droom gehad

het. Al waarvan hy bewus is, is haar nabyheid, die feit dat sy in 'n oorgroot Themp langs hom op die bed sit, die maanlig blink in haar hare. "Ek's jammer dat ek jou wakker gemaak het."

"Dis oukei." Sy sluk en die spasie tussen hulle begin wegraak. "Jake ... ?"

"Ja?" Sy stem is besig om gesond te word en hier in die donker klink hy amper normaal. As dit is hoe sy stem voor die ongeluk geklink het, bygesê.

"Hou my vas, Jake. Asseblief?" Sy laat hang haar kop, verleë oor die naakte begeerte in haar stem.

Jake huiwer nie, maar neem haar in sy arms en vryf oor haar rug asof om die weke se skeiding weg te streel. Alhoewel hulle die afgelope paar weke nader aan mekaar gekom het, het hulle nooit weer die geleentheid gehad om te soen nie. Maar hier, in die donker nagstilte, maak dit vir Jake nie saak of hy nie kan onthou of hy ooit met haar getroud was nie. Sy is beeldskoon en liefdevol, en daar is 'n leeftyd se liefwees tussen hulle. Hy fluister teen haar nek. "Jamie, jy is beeldskoon. Weet jy dit?"

"Mmmm." Sy beweeg nader aan hom en hy verloor hom in sy begeerte na haar. Haar stem is hees van hartstog toe sy naby sy oor fluister. "Ek mis jou elke dag meer. Hierdie deel van jou."

Sy sit 'n entjie weg en hulle oë ontmoet. Voordat hy hom kan afvra of dit reg of verkeerd is, voordat hy hom daarop kan wys dat hy belowe het om op 'n veilige afstand te bly totdat hy haar kan onthou, laat sak Jake sy gesig na hare. Stadig ... Asof dit net so natuurlik is soos om haar in sy arms te hou, raak hulle lippe aan mekaar, en Jake soen haar soos wat hy weke lank wou doen. "Jamie ... " Hy is uitasem toe hy haar mond laat gaan. "Wat doen jy aan my?"

Hy bestudeer haar gesig en besef haar oë is vol trane. Haar mond gaan oop asof sy hom iets wil vra, maar dan raak sy sag aan die teer plekke op sy gebrande gesig. Toe sy haar vingers deur syne stoot, word daar 'n vuur in hom aan die brand gestee.

"Ek is lief vir jou, Jake." Sy lig haar mond na hom en terwyl sy hom soen, raak sy wange nat van haar trane. "Ek is lief vir jou."

Jake ervaar 'n groeiende ongeduld en skielik is sy behoefte aan haar groter as sy volgende asemteug. Hy trek haar saggies langs hom neer. "Ek is lief vir jou, Jamie."

Sy leun half bo-oor hom en soen hom, nog nie gereed om haar aan die benewelende hartstog oor te gee nie. Toe sy haar kop oplig en ondersoekend na hom kyk, sien hy 'n vrees in haar oë wat vroeër nie daar was nie. Haar stem is 'n angstige fluistering. "Is jy lief vir my ... omdat jy onthou?"

*Hy maak sy oë toe en voel hoe sy hom laat gaan. Nee, Here, moenie dat sy dit vra nie. Ons hoort bymekaar ...*

*Ken My in alles wat jy doen en Ek sal jou die regte pad laat loop, my seun.*

Die woorde weerklink in sy hart en eggo deur sy hele wese. Jake weet dadelik dat die sagte, stil stem aan God behoort. En as dit nie nou die tyd vir hom en Jamie is nie, sal dit een van die dae wees. Hy sit regop en baklei teen die vuur wat nog in hom woed. "Jamie ... is dit regtig so belangrik?" Hy maak sy oë

oop en betrap haar blik ondersoekend op hom. “Ek is lief vir jou. Ek het jou voorheen liefgehad, en ek het jou nou lief. Is dit nie genoeg nie?”

Sy sit regop, haar liggaam naby hom, en klem haar hande saam. Toe kyk sy na die trouring aan haar vinger. “Nee.” Haar oë ontmoet syne. “Ek wil nie herskep wat ons gehad het nie.” Sy hou haar kop skeef en die pyn in haar stem sny deur hom. “Ek wil hê dit moet reg wees, Jake. Hoe graag ek jou ook al nou wil hê, ek wil alles hê.” Sy vee oor haar wange. “Alles van jou.”

Hy leun nader en soen haar weer sag en talmend. Toe hy haar laat gaan, is sy begeerte so groot dat hy amper voor die versoeking swig om vir haar te jok, vir haar te sê dat hy wel onthou. Maar hy neem haar hande in syne en laat sak sy kop sodat hulle gesigte op ’n ander manier aan mekaar raak. “Bid asseblief saam met my, Jamie. Sal jy?”

Sy passie word geleidelik deur iets diepers vervang, iets wat in sy hart geëts word. “Bid dat dit ’n terugflits is wat my wakker gemaak het, en dat dit van nou af vinniger sal gaan, want ek wil jou hê, Jamie. Maar jy’s reg; ek wil eers alles onthou.”

In die donker gastekamer bid hulle om God se genade en seën. Jamie sluit die gebed af met ’n laaste versoek. “Bring hom terug, Here ... bring hom huis toe. Asseblief.”

Dis net na vier die middag toe hulle met die veerboot ingaan en ’n taxi na die brandweerstasie neem. Agt mans en hulle gesinne wag reeds op Jake-hulle.

Jake wonder of hy al ooit so senuweeagtig was.

Die terugflits of droom wat hy vroeër gehad het, het Jake half laat hoop dat die stasie nog ’n paar herinneringe sou terugbring. Nes die lees van die Bybel en sy dagboek tot ’n herontwaking in sy siel gelei het. Maar niks lyk naastenby bekend nie, en toe hulle die stasie binnegaan, voel dit asof hy van voor af by die kerk is.

Mans wat hy nie ken nie, staan nader om hom te omhels of sy hand te skud; die vroue het trane in hulle oë en klou aan hom asof hulle bang is om hom te laat gaan. “Jake, ons is so bly jy is hier!” En: “Ons mis jou, man. Wanneer kom jy terug?”

Jake is dankbaar toe hy kaptein Hisel gewaar. Dis ten minste een gesig wat bekend lyk, selfs al is dit net omdat hulle mekaar in die hospitaal gesien het. “Hei, Jake ... jy lyk al stukke beter.”

“Jip.” Jake skud die kaptein se hand en glimlag. Hy kyk rond of hy Jamie sien. Uit al die mense by die stasie is sy en Sierra die enigste bekendes, en hy haat dit om van hulle af weg te wees.

“Hoe gaan dit met jou geheue?”

“Stadig.” Jake kyk die kaptein reguit in die oë. “Ek het baie uit my dagboek en die aantekeninge in my Bybel wys geword. Maar ek kan nie regtig sê dat ek weer begin onthou het nie.”

Kaptein Hisel maak ’n gebaar wat die hele vertrek insluit. “Lyk enigiets hier vir jou bekend?”

“Nee.” Jake frons en skud sy kop. “Glad nie.” Hy druk sy hande in sy

broeksakke. Sy jeans sit los en is dalk 'n halfsentimeter te lank, maar dis te verstane. Jamie sê hy het waarskynlik sewe kilogram sedert die ongeluk verloor. Hy kyk na die muur agter kaptein Hisel waar 'n ry foto's hang. Mans, almal in hulle brandweeruniforms, met twee datums wat onderaan gelys is. Die tweede datum vir elke man is 11 September 2001. Jake staan nader en bestudeer die gesigte. "Is dit ons ouens?"

Die kaptein se kaak bult. "Almal van hulle."

Jake het nie op hoogte gebly met die nuus nie. Aangesien hy nie kan onthou dat hy 'n brandweerman was of selfs dat hy in New York gewerk het nie, het hy geen belang daarby nie. Hy was in elk geval te besig om uit sy Bybel en dagboek te lees om hom te steur aan wat in die koerante geskryf word. Maar waar hy nou hier staan, word hy geruk deur die omvang van dit wat daardie vreeslike Dinsdagoggend in die brandweer-geledere gebeur het. Hy kyk na die kaptein en praat sagter. "Hoe hanteer die ouens dit?"

"Dis iets vreesliks, JB." Kaptein Hisel se stem breek en hy kyk vir 'n oomblik na die vloer. Toe hy sy stem terugkry, lig hy sy ken en kyk na Jake. "Die departement moes 'n lessenaar net vir die begrafnisse skep." Hy vryf oor sy ylwordende hare. "Driehonderd-drie-en-veertig mans. Daar word elke dag begrafnisse gehou, soms drie of vier op 'n dag. Een Saterdag was daar vier-en-twintig. Vier-en-twintig begrafnisse, JB. Kan jy dit glo?"

Jake is nie seker wat om te sê of hoe om te reageer nie, maar hy word getref deur die pyn wat hy in die kaptein se oë sien. Die angs wat hy ervaar, laat hom besef waarom dr. Cleary opdrag gegee het dat hy sy lewe so eenvoudig moontlik moet hou totdat hy onthou. Moet hy die kaptein 'n druk gee? Dalk sê hy is jammer oor die verliese? Hy weet nie; dus plaas hy sy hand op die kaptein se skouer en sê niks nie.

Kaptein Hisel snuif en kyk op. "Dis nie net dit nie, maar sedert die aanvalle is ons skielik beroemd." Hy trek sy skouers op. "Vir die eerste paar weke ná 11 September kon ons nie eens ons deure toemaak nie. Honderde mense het met koekies of etes of blomme hier aangekom. Vir ons kom sê hoe wonderlik ons is, selfs ons handtekeninge kom vra."

Die kaptein maak 'n ergerlike geluid. "Weet jy hoe het dit ons laat voel?" Hy wag nie vir 'n antwoord nie. "Aaklig. Want ons moes in die torings saam met die manne wat ons verloor het, doodgegaan het. My hemel, ons was nie die helde nie, JB. Ons was gelukkig. Die ouens wat in die aanval dood is – hulle is die helde, verstaan?"

Jake knik, weer onseker oor wat om te sê. Dis duidelik dat die kaptein met hom wil praat, hom op hoogte wil bring van alles wat gebeur het. Maar sonder 'n verlede waaraan hy dit kan anker, is dit amper soos om na 'n nuusberig te luister. Jake is hartseer, met afgryse vervul. Maar dis nie asof dit hom persoonlik raak nie, nie soos vir kaptein Hisel nie.

Die kaptein kyk ondersoekend na hom. "Jy lyk anders, JB. Iets aan jou gesig." 'n Paar mense by die kerk het dit ook gesê, en Jake antwoord die kaptein soos hy hulle geantwoord het. "Dalk is dit die brandwonde."

“Jy’s maerder.”

“Ja ... ” Jake gee die kaptein ’n skewe glimlag. “Dit kon seker erger gewees het.”

“Het jy al met Sue gesels vandat jy weer op die been is?”

“Sue?”

“Sue Henning.” Die kaptein lyk vir ’n oomblik oorbluf, maar toe verskyn daar ’n begrypende uitdrukking op sy gesig. “Ek bly vergeet van jou geheueverlies.” Hy gee ’n hartseer laggie. “Sue was met Larry getroud. Jou beste vriend.”

Skielik kom Jake se dagboekinskrywings na hom toe terug, die kere toe hy oor Larry en Sue en Katy geskryf het, hoe naby hy aan Larry gevoel het en hoe lief hy vir sy vriend se gesin was. Sy oë spring weer na die foto’s teen die muur en hy soek totdat hy die een kry wat *Larry Henning, 23 Augustus 1968 – 11 September 2001* lees. Die man is frisser as wat Jake hom voorgestel het en daar is ’n breë glimlag op sy gesig.

*Hy onthou iets uit sy dagboek, iets wat hy oor Larry geskryf het. Ons sal altyd beste vriende wees. Ons sal altyd ’n oog oor mekaar hou, by die stasie en in ons huwelike. Selfs in ons liefde vir die Here. Larry Henning is die naaste wat God daaraan gekom het om vir my ’n broer te gee.*

Jake kyk speurend in die man se oë. *Hoekom, Here ... hoekom voel Larry nie eens ’n bietjie bekend nie? En hoekom kan ek nie ons goeie tye saam onthou nie?* ’n Diep hartseer wel in Jake op, nie die soort hartseer wat kom wanneer jy iemand mis wat jy liefgehad en verloor het nie. Maar die hartseer van ’n verwyderde, onberekenbare verlies. Want die glimlaggende oë van die oorlede vreemdeling laat Jake glo dat as Larry nou in die vertrek was, hulle op ’n manier by mekaar sou aanklank vind.

Selfs al sou sy geheue nooit terugkeer nie.

Jake staan terug en draai weer na kaptein Hisel. “Hoe gaan dit met haar?”

“Nie goed nie. Ek het haar gevra of sy al met Jamie gepraat het, maar blykbaar het hulle nog nie weer sedert die ongeluk gesels nie. Sy sê julle drie het julle ruimte nodig. Totdat jou geheue terug is.”

Jake knik. “Kan ek jou ’n guns vra?”

“Enigiets, JB ... jy weet dit.”

“Gee Sue se adres vir my ... sommer die aanwysings na haar huis toe. Ek en Jamie wil soontoe gaan en haar laat weet dat ons omgee.”

Kaptein Hisel kyk deur vernoude oë na Jake, amper asof hy na die man soek wat iewers in hom wegkruip, die ou wat sal onthou wat al die ouens van Enjin 57 en Leer 96 deur die jare saam deurgemaak het. “Dis jy, nè, JB? Selfs al onthou jy nie?”

Die vraag is soos ’n klap deur Jake se selfvertroue en maak dat hy uit die brandweerstasie wil hardloop. Wat bedoel die kaptein? Natuurlik is hy Jake Bryan ... wie anders dan? Hy gee ’n flou laggie. “Moenie sulke goed sê nie, Kaptein. Jy maak my bang.”

Die kaptein maak ’n afwysende gebaar. “Ek’s jammer. Dis net ... dis vreemd

om met jou oor Larry te praat en in jou oë te sien dat jy hom nie onthou nie.” Die kaptein bly stil en kyk weer deur geskreefde oë na hom. “Jy onthou regtig nie, nè, JB?”

“Nee.” Hy trek sy asem vinnig in en staan ’n tree terug. Hy moet by Jamie en Sierra uitkom. Nou. “Regtig nie.” Daar kom stemme uit die vertrek langsaan en hy herken een van hulle as Jamie s’n. “Dankie vir die gesels, Kaptein. Ek moet by Jamie uitkom.”

Sierra sien hom eerste toe Jake by die vertrek inkom. Haar oë verhelder en sy los Jamie om na hom toe te hardloop. Al is sy been steeds gespalk, het Jake geleer hoe om homself op een been te stut en sy dogtertjie te vang as sy in sy arms opspring. Hy wens kaptein Hisel kan hom nou sien. Natuurlik is hy Jake Bryan – sy dogtertjie sou nooit so lief vir hom gewees het as hy nie haar pa was nie.

Die res van die aand bly hy aan Jamie se sy en beperk hy sy gesprekke tot een- en tweewoord-sinne. Hy vermy enige gesprekke oor sy amnesie. Voordat hulle ry, gee die kaptein vir hom ’n stukkie papier met aanwysings na Sue en Larry se huis. In die taxi haal Jake die aanwysings uit sy sak en wys dit vir Jamie.

“Ek dink ons moet ’n draai by Sue gaan maak.”

Jamie kyk na die stukkie papier en sug hartseer. “Ek weet hoe om daar te kom, Jake. Voor die ongeluk was ons baie goeie vriende.”

Jake dink vir ’n oomblik daaroor. Dis nou eers seweur, maar Sierra het tussen hulle aan die slaap geraak, en haar klein lyfie lê knus teen hom. “As ons so naby bly, hoekom was ons nog nie by haar nie?”

“Jy was nie gereed nie.”

Jamie het ’n bietjie te vinnig geantwoord, en dit gaan nie ongemerk by Jake verby nie. “Dis nie die enigste rede nie, nè?”

Daar kom ’n pyntrek in Jamie se oë. “Ek het haar ’n paar maal gebel, maar sy kon nooit na die telefoon toe kom nie.” Sy kyk na Jake. “Die laaste keer dat ek met Sue gepraat het, het ons gehoop dat Larry net vermis was. Dat hulle hom iewers in die puin sou opspoor.” Jamie haal haar een skouer op. “Nou ... nou weet ons hy is dood, Jake. En ... ” haar stem breek, “ek’s nie seker ek sien kans om haar te sien nie, want ... ” Sy snuif twee keer en Jake sit sy arm om haar.

“Dis oukei, my skat. Jy kan maar sê ... ek’s hier.” Sy vryf met haar duim en wysvinger oor haar wenkbroue. Toe kyk sy weer in sy oë, en vir die eerste keer sien hy die soort angsbevange vrees waarvan hy in sy dagboek geskryf het.

“Jake ... dit kon jy gewees het. Maar omdat dit nie was nie, is ek nie seker of Sue my eens sou wou sien nie. Ek bedoel ... ” Sy lig haar hande radeloos. “Ek weet die Here was daar by Larry. Hy was daar by jou. Maar tog ... ek hét my man, en sy nie. Om na mekaar te kyk en dit te erken, wel, dit sal die hartseerste ding wees wat ons nog ooit moes doen.”

Jake wag totdat Jamie weer beheer oor haar emosies het. Dan soen hy haar



sag op haar slaap en praat in 'n stem wat byna heeltemal gesond klink. “Ek sal jou help.”

“Oukei.” Sy knik en haar wang raak aan sy gebrande gesig.

Die gebaar maak seer, maar hy gee nie om nie. Al wat hy nou wil doen, is om Jamie deur die volgende paar uur te help. En om met sy beste vriend se vrou te gaan simpatiseer.

Hulle is stil tydens die veerbootrit terug na Staten Island, en Jamie verskoon haarself om kleedkamer toe te gaan. Jake tel Sierra op sy skoot en glimlag vir haar. “Jy lyk al lekker vaak.”

“Mmmm.” Sy gaap en laat sak haar voorkop teen syne. “Vlindersoentjies?”

Jake weerstaan die vae paniek wat in hom opstu. Hy soen Sierra op die neus en knipoog vir haar. “Nou goed, lawwe lyfie.”

“Toe, Pappa ...” Sierra kantel haar kop afwagter. “Doen dit dan!”

Hy aarsel en sy hart klop twee maal vinniger as gewoonlik. “Begin jy.”

Dit stel haar tevrede, en haar oë glinster. “Oukei.” Sy kom nader en vryf met haar neusie teen syne. Dan draai sy haar gesiggie 'n paar sentimeter en fladder haar wimpers 'n paar maal teen sy wang. Hy snap gou en 'n paar sekondes later kielie hy haar wangetjies met sy wimpers.

“Weet Pappa wat?”

“Wat?”

“Dis die lekkerste lekker vir my en Pappa.”

“Ja, Sierra.” Hy trek haar koppie teen sy bors vas en hou haar vas, dankbaar dat hy lewe, dankbaar dat hy steeds 'n kans het om hierdie kosbare kind lief te hê. “Dis ons lekkerste lekker.”

“Gaan ons vanaand na Katy se huis toe?”

Jake het 'n oomblik nodig voordat hy onthou. Katy is Sue en Larry se klein dogtertjie. “Ja ... vir so 'n rukkjie.”

Sierra sit regop sodat sy sy oë kan sien. “Het Katy se pappa seergekry in daai groot brand? Die een met die vliegtuie in die gebou?”

Jake se moed sak in sy skoene. Die kind weet nie en hy moet haar vertel. Hulle kan tog nie by Sue-hulle aandoen en toelaat dat Sierra Katy vra waar haar pappa is nie. “My skat, ek moet vir jou iets baie hartseer oor Katy se pappa vertel.”

Jamie kom terug en gaan sit langs Jake. “Waaroor gesels julle twee?”

Jake gee haar 'n veelseggende kyk. “Sierra het my oor Katy se pappa uitgevra. Of hy seergekry het in die brand, die een met die vliegtuie in die gebou.”

“O.” Jamie trek haar asem skerp in en kyk vir 'n oomblik op in die donker herfslug. Dan beweeg haar blik na Jake en haar oë pleit by hom. “Vertel jy, oukei?”

Jake kyk weer na Sierra. “Katy se pappa is dood, my liefie. Hy het by daardie groot geboue ingegaan om mense te red, maar nie weer uitgekóm nie.”

Sierra se gesiggie verstrak van vrees en haar onskuldige oë skiet vol tranes. “Bedoel Pappa hy gaan nooit weer huis toe kom nie?”

“Nee.” Jake plaas sy hande op sy dogtertjie se skouers sodat hy in haar oë kan kyk. “Maar ons weet waar Katy se pappa is, nè, my skat?”

“Ja.” ’n Groot traan loop stadig oor Sierra se wang en val op Jake se jeans. “Hy’s by Jesus.”

“En dis mos nie so sleg nie, of hoe?”

“Nee.” Sierra snuif. “Maar Katy het nie meer ’n pappa nie.”

“Ja, liefste, sy het. Dis net dat haar pappa nou in die hemel bly.”

Sierra dink vir ’n paar oomblikke daaroor na. “Ek wil nie hê Pappa moet ooit in die hemel gaan bly nie, oukei? Eers as ek ook daar is.”

“Ek sal nie.” Jake kies sy woorde versigtig. As 11 September hom enigiets geleer het, is dit dat daar nie waarborge in hierdie lewe is nie. Hy en Jamie wissel ’n betekenisvolle kyk voordat hy vervolg. “Maar as Jesus vir my ’n werk het – soos om mense uit ’n vuur te red – en Hy dan vir my sê om hemel toe te kom, sal ek moet gaan. Jy weet dit, nè? Nes Katy se pappa.”

Sierra hou haar kop skeef en haar goue krulle val sag oor haar pienk trui.

“Pappa bedoel Jesus het vir Katy se pappa gesê hy moet hemel toe kom terwyl hy mense gehelp het?”

“Ja.” Jake knik beslis. “Dis presies wat gebeur het.”

“O.” Sy vee haar neus af. “Ek hoop nog steeds Jesus doen dit nie met Pappa nie, want ek wil Pappa vir altyd by my hê.”

Die veerboot bereik die dokke en hulle loop na hulle motor toe. Tien minute later staan hulle op die voorstoep van nog ’n huis wat Jake nie herken nie. ’n Mooi blonde vrou maak die deur oop en toe sy hulle sien, vlieg haar hand oor haar mond. Sy en Jamie is albei dadelik in tranes.

“Jake ... Jamie ... ” Sy maak haar arms oop en Jake, Jamie en Sierra omhels haar. Hulle staan amper ’n minuut lank so, gebroke oor die verlies van ’n man wat Jake om die dood nie kan onthou nie.

Sierra wriemel haar los en Jake kyk op toe Sierra aan Sue se mou trek.

“Tannie Sue ... ”

Sue snuif hard en glimlag deur haar tranes vir Sierra. “Ja, my skat.”

“Kan ek met Katy gaan speel?”

“Ja, my liefie. Katy is bo in haar kamer.”

Toe Sierra weg is, kyk Jamie na die blonde vrou. “Ek’s jammer, Sue ... Ek’t probeer bel.” Jamie se stem klink gesmoord teen Sue se T-hemp.

“Nee ... dis my skuld. Ek het nie gedink ek kon na Jake kyk sonder ... ” Sy staan terug om na Jake te kyk en begin onbedaarlik snik. “S-s-sonder om Larry ook te sien nie.”

Hulle gaan in en vir die volgende uur laat hulle Sue praat en huil en voordat hulle ry, bid hulle saam. Die enigste keer dat Sue glimlag, is toe sy Jake en Larry saam onthou, en weer toe sy hoor dat Jamie ’n Christen geword het. “God is nog steeds so goed ... ” Sue vee haar tranes af. “Vandat Larry weg is, is Hy nog meer by my. Ek voel Hom elke dag, elke oomblik.”

Dis net na een die oggend toe Jake deur dieselfde reeks beelde geruk word. Hy vlieg op, sy asemhaling hard en vinnig, maar hy skree nie weer nie.

Hierdie keer het hy geen twyfel nie – dis 'n terugflits, nie 'n absurde droom nie.

Hy hardloop in 'n eindelose trapkuil af – dalk na iemand toe wat hulp nodig het, soos Jamie voorgestel het. Maar toe val hy by die trappe af en iemand steek 'n hand uit om hom te help. Dis vanselfsprekend dat hy deur 'n brandweerman opgehelp sal word, maar 'n mens sou dink dat dit Larry of een van die ouens by die stasie moet wees.

Dis hierdie gedeelte van die terugflits wat eenvoudig nie sin maak nie. Die gedeelte waaroor Jake daardie nag 'n uur lank rondrol. Want die gesig van die brandweerman behoort aan iemand wat Jake beslis herken, maar dis nie Larry of enigiemand anders nie.

Dis sy eie.

# Chapter TWENTY-NINE

NOVEMBER 6, 2001

The phone call from Captain Hisel came two days later.

By then, Jamie could practically watch the flashbacks happen. Jake had been having the same ones—not only at night but in the daytime as well. He would be reading his journal or playing on the floor with Sierra, when suddenly his expression would change and he'd go perfectly still. Seconds later, his body would start to shake from the images in his head. In less than a minute the moment would pass, and Jake would search the room until his eyes locked on hers. For a moment his mouth would hang open, his eyes filled with confusion.

Then he'd tell her what he'd seen.

“Why would I see *myself*? ” Always Jake's question was the same. “The flashbacks are supposed to be *real* memories, right?”

Jamie had to agree that what Jake was seeing was strange. More to ease Jake's concerns than her own, she had called Dr. Cleary and gotten the response she expected.

“Head injuries are a tricky thing. The recovery of a person's memory isn't a perfect science. Strange things—seeing yourself as someone else, for instance—are not unheard of. I would expect the memory to get clearer, more correct as time goes on.”

The doctor was right—every time Jake experienced the flashback it was more vivid. But instead of eventually *becoming* the firefighter, Jake still seemed to be someone else, someone who saw the firefighter very clearly—helping him up off the stairs.

It was just after four in the afternoon, two days after their visit to the fire station, when the phone rang. Jake was in the living room reading a book to Sierra, and Jamie was getting dinner ready. She dried her hands on a nearby dishtowel and answered the phone. “Hello?”

“Jamie, hi ... it's Captain Hisel.”

“Hi.” She went back to measuring rice into the pot of water on the stove. “It was nice seeing you the other day. I think maybe it helped.” She stirred the pot and set the spoon down. “Jake’s been having flashbacks. Seeing a firefighter in the stairwell of what must be the south tower.”

“A firefighter?”

“Yeah. The doctor said sometimes it takes a while before the flashbacks make sense.”

“What direction was the firefighter headed?”

“Ummm.” Jamie wasn’t sure why, but for some reason the captain’s question caused a hesitation in her heartbeat. “I don’t know. I’m not sure he can tell yet.”

Captain Hisel sighed in a way that made him sound tired and old. “Jamie, after you left a bunch of us had a talk about Jake.” He hesitated. “I know I’m going to sound crazy ... and I’m not trying to upset you, really I’m not.”

“Whatever it is, just tell me.” Jamie heard herself utter a single, forced laugh. “What?”

“Jamie ... are you sure he’s Jake?”

The question made her knees weak and sent her across the kitchen to the dining room table. She sat down and leaned her elbows on the worn-out oak top. When she finally had her bearings, there was anger in her tone. “What in the world are you talking about?”

“Jamie, the guy just didn’t seem like Jake.” The captain released a frustrated huff. “I mean, he looks like Jake and he’s about the same size. But something about his face, the shape of his jaw. I don’t know, but the other guys agreed with me.” He paused. “I just wondered if you were sure.”

Suddenly, the doubts Jamie had suffered when Jake was in the hospital came rushing back. She pictured the words “O-negative” written on his medical chart and the fact that he neither talked nor walked like Jake. And what about Brownie? Even their old dog had doubted whether

the man in their house was Jake.

Those thoughts—all of them—came in as much time as it took for her to draw a single breath. Then just as quickly she let them go, banished them from her mind, and clenched the phone more tightly in her hands. “Listen, Captain ...” Her voice was a study in controlled fury. “Tell the guys at the station to have a little compassion, okay? Jake’s doctor said that people with amnesia don’t completely act like themselves until their memory returns. His face looks a little different because he’s lost weight. And Jake’s memory is only just starting to come back.”

“I know, Jamie ... I wasn’t going to call. I just thought that maybe you were too close to the situation to see what the rest of us saw as soon as —”

“Please, Captain Hisel, stop.” Jamie stood and headed back to the kitchen. “I’ve got dinner to make. Thank you for calling.” Then without waiting for a response from the man, she clicked the off button and returned the phone to its base. Adrenaline surged through her veins and made her heart race. A fine layer of perspiration broke out on the palms of her hands and across her face.

Of all the nerve, calling to say something so completely absurd. Did he think a call like that would help her feel better? Make her more relaxed while she waited for Jake’s memory to return? Or was he merely so self-centered that he couldn’t see past the amnesia to the man who was trying so hard to become the person he’d left behind? Either way, Jamie couldn’t believe he’d called.

It was the meanest thing she’d ever heard.

A few minutes later Jake and Sierra came into the kitchen, holding hands. Sierra was smiling, skipping along beside Jake, but Jake’s eyes were troubled, more confused than she’d seen them in weeks. “I had another one.”

Sierra broke away and headed into the backyard toward the swing set.

Jamie stared at Jake and barely noticed the child leave the house.

“Another flashback?”

Jake nodded and leaned against the wall, his eyes locked on hers. “It’s getting more vivid, longer than before.”

The roof of Jamie’s mouth was dry as dirt. “What ... what do you see?”

“The same thing,” Jake shrugged. “I’m running down the stairs and I fall, a fireman stops to help me, but when I look at him, it’s like looking in a mirror.”

Doubts ricocheted across her mind like so many pinballs. Jamie closed her eyes and thought about God. *Lord ... I hate feeling like this ... Please take away the awful thoughts Captain Hisel’s put in my mind. Please.* She blinked and opened her mouth, but it took several seconds before she could form the question. “Which way was the firefighter headed, you know, the one who looked like you?”

Jake lowered his brow and angled his head. “What do you mean?”

“I mean,” Jamie ran her tongue along her lower lip, “I mean was he going up the stairs or down?”

For a moment Jake stared out the window, then his eyebrows relaxed as the answer came to him. “Up.” He gave a firm nod of his head and slipped his hands in the pockets of his sweats. “The fireman was going up.”

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The flashback grew even longer the following day, and Jake shared the details with her. Now, after the firefighter—who seemed to be Jake—helped him to his feet, Jake noticed a helmet on the ground, a helmet with something taped to the inside.

Jamie was terrified about what the flashbacks meant and how they lined up with Captain Hisel’s concerns. She started scrutinizing Jake more closely, watching the way he brushed his teeth and combed his hair, calculating in her mind the dozens of little ways that the captain was right. The man living in her house did *not* act exactly like Jake Bryan. Once when Jake had turned and found her staring at him, she jumped—as though

she'd been caught looking at a stranger.

After that incident she prayed for nearly an hour, and God helped her relax. It was amazing, after doubting His existence for so long, how quickly she'd adapted to calling on Him. Not because she was supposed to, but because she knew no other way to find solid ground in the midst of all that was happening. And always when she prayed, she felt her doubts dim, at least a little.

So what if Jake could see himself in the flashback. At least he was a part of the memory; that had to be a good sign, right? Jamie begged God to eliminate her fears altogether, but by nightfall the tension grew again. What if Captain Hisel was right? What if by some freak mix-up Jake wasn't really Jake? She kept her fears to herself, but they made it impossible for her to eat or sleep.

By Friday night she felt like she was losing her mind.

That evening after dinner, Jake and Sierra headed into the family room and popped the *Cinderella* video into the VCR. Jamie bundled up in a sweater and grabbed the phone off its base just as Jake looked back into the room. His smile was easy and warm. "What're you doing?"

Jamie felt like a convict. She swallowed hard and held up the phone. "I'm going outside to call Sue."

"Okay." He winked at her and pulled Sierra up onto his lap. "We'll be waiting for you."

The picture he made sitting in his favorite chair, cuddling Sierra close and watching *Cinderella*, was so familiar Jamie almost hung up the phone and joined them. Jake's face was still red, still thinner than it had been. His voice wasn't quite back to normal, and neither were his mannerisms. But the man was Jake; he had to be. What was the alternative? Someone else who looked just like Jake had been in the stairwell at the same exact instant ... someone who knew the look and name of Sierra.

It was impossible.

Still ... the few times she'd talked to Sue since their visit the other



night, they hadn't discussed Jake, other than to agree that he was doing well—all things considered. Instead, they'd focused their conversations on the search for Larry's body and the hard time Katy was having handling her daddy's death. Not once had Jamie wanted to voice her irrational fears or the comments that Captain Hisel had made.

Until that moment.

Now she needed to share every doubt that plagued her, needed her friend to listen and assure her that these crazy concerns were completely unfounded. Most of all Jamie needed perspective, and as she headed outside to the picnic table with the phone, that's exactly what she intended to get.

Sue was home, and they spent the first few minutes talking about two more firefighter bodies that had been found in the rubble. When there was a lull, Jamie cleared her throat and stared at the stars overhead. A cold wind found its way down the back of her jacket, and she pulled it tighter to her body.

"I want to tell you something ... something about Jake."

"Okay." The anxiety in Jamie's tone was enough to make Sue sound suddenly serious. "What about him?"

"Captain Hisel called the other day." Jamie held her breath. She wouldn't cry, not when she wanted so badly to tell Sue what the captain said. "He ... he and the guys honestly wonder if Jake's really Jake." She paused. "Can you believe that?"

"That's ... crazy." Sue hesitated just a bit too long. "Don't you think so?"

"Of course I do. That's why I'm telling you."

Sue waited a beat. "Jake isn't acting strange, is he?"

Jamie wanted to stand up and throw the phone over the fence. She worked to keep the frustration from her tone. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"I don't know ... I mean, *you* think he's really Jake, don't you?"

“Yes.” Jamie stood and paced across the yard to her dying flower garden. She'd planned on telling Sue about Jake's strange flashbacks, but then, she'd also planned on Sue acting more shocked about Captain Hisel's phone call. Somehow, instead, her friend seemed almost ambivalent, as though maybe a mix-up really were possible. “Look, Sue, I feel like I'm losing it here.” She raked her fingers through her hair and turned around, her back to the garden. “Tell me I'm having a couple of bad days. Tell me doubts are normal. Tell me that Jake is who I think he is. But don't let me just sway here in the wind.”

“All right.” Empathy filled Sue's voice, and her tone was softer than before. “You're having a couple of bad days, and your doubts are normal. Is that better?”

“No.” Jamie's mouth hung open, and she let herself fall back against the wooden fence. “Not if you don't mean it. I mean tell me the truth, Sue, did he seem like Jake to you?”

“You want the truth?” Sue's voice caught.

“Yes ... I want it desperately.” Jamie's teeth chattered, but not because of the cool night air.

“Okay.” A shaky sigh made its way across the phone lines. “When you left that night, Katy found me in the kitchen. She asked me a question that has bothered me ever since.”

Jamie held her breath. “What?”

“She asked me who the man was with you and Sierra.”

The phone slipped from Jamie's hands and fell to the dirt below. Ignoring the damp ground, she dropped to her knees and stared at the place where the receiver lay. *Breathe*, she ordered herself. *This is all just a dream, a nightmare, and any moment you'll wake up and everyone will know the truth. That Jake Bryan really was who everyone thought him to be.*

Jamie could hear a small tinny voice coming from the phone. “Jamie ... Jamie, talk to me. Jamie, are you there?”

*God ... help me. I haven't been praying long enough to know what to say, but help me. I can't stand up underneath this.*

Words that Jake had highlighted in his Bible filtered through her mind. *Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.*

Jamie's head was spinning. She closed her eyes and forced herself to blow the air from her lungs with slow breaths. The voice was still calling out to her. "Jamie ... pick up the phone. Please."

Finally, her fingers worked their way across the damp soil and found the receiver. She brought it to her ear and tried to think of what to say. Control, that's what she needed. God would give her rest, but she needed to give herself a little control. She gave two short coughs. "Sue ... I'm ... I'm sorry. I'm back."

"Jamie, are you okay? I can come over if you need me."

"No." *Control ... control ... control ...* "Everything's fine." She opened her mouth, and a quiet, strange-sounding laugh came out. "The doctor said Jake wouldn't act like himself until his memory returned. Really, Sue ... tell Katy the man was Sierra's daddy. And that everything's okay."

"Of course." Sue's answer came fast. "I mean the guy is Jake. Obviously. I'm just saying that Katy didn't recognize him right off, but that's to be expected what with his broken ankle and his burns, the way he walks and talks a little different. I never meant to ..."

Jamie stopped listening. Sue was rambling, her words running together in an attempt to make up for scaring Jamie. When she was finished, Jamie worked the muscles in her jaw and looked up at the sky once more. "Thanks for listening, Sue. I need to get back inside. Don't worry about me. Everything's fine. We're watching *Cinderella* tonight."

# Nege-en-twintig

6 November 2001

Kaptein Hisel bel twee dae later.

Teen hierdie tyd kan Jamie as't ware sien hoe die terugflitse kom en gaan. Jake bly dieselfde een kry – nie net snags nie, maar bedags ook. Hy sal besig wees om te lees of met Sierra op die mat te speel wanneer sy uitdrukking skielik verander en hy doodstil word. Sekondes later begin sy liggaam ruk as die beelde voor hom afspeel. Die hele episode duur minder as 'n minuut, en wanneer dit oor is, soek Jake se oë deur die vertrek totdat hy haar kry. Sy mond sal vir 'n oomblik oophang en hy sal asof in 'n dwaal na haar kyk.

Dan vertel hy haar wat hy gesien het.

“Hoekom sien ek altyd *myself*?” Jake vra altyd dieselfde vraag. “Is die terugflitse nie veronderstel om *regte* herinneringe te wees nie?”

Jamie moet saamstem dat dit vreemd is. Toe sy meer ter wille van Jake se onsekerheid as haar eie besluit om dr. Cleary te skakel, kry sy die antwoord wat sy verwag het.

“Hoofbeserings is 'n snaakse ding. Die herstelproses van die geheue is nie 'n eksakte wetenskap nie. Vreemde dinge – soos om jouself as iemand anders te sien – is nie ongehoord nie. Ek voorspel dat die herinnering mettertyd duideliker en meer realisties sal word.”

Die dokter was reg – elke keer wanneer Jake die terugflits kry, word dit duideliker. Maar in plaas daarvan dat hy die brandweerman *word*, is Jake steeds iemand anders, iemand wat die brandweerman voor hom baie duidelik sien.

Dis net na vier die middag, twee dae ná hulle besoek aan die brandweerstasie, toe die telefoon lui. Jake is in die woonkamer besig om vir Sierra te lees en Jamie is in die kombuis doenig. Sy droog haar hande aan 'n vadoek af en gaan antwoord die telefoon. “Hallo?”

“Jamie, haai ... dis kaptein Hisel.”

“Haai.” Sy skep 'n koppie rys in die kastrol water op die stoof. “Dit was lekker om julle nou die dag te sien. Ek dink dit het dalk gehelp.” Nadat sy die rys een maal geroer het, sit sy die lepel neer. “Jake het begin terugflitse kry. Van 'n brandweerman iewers op die trappe in die suidelike toring.”

“'n Brandweerman?”

“Ja. Die dokter sê dit neem soms tyd voordat die terugflitse begin sin maak.”

“In watter rigting was die brandweerman op pad?”

“Ummm.” Jamie is nie seker nie, maar om die een of ander rede laat die kaptein se vraag haar hart 'n slag mis. “Ek weet nie. Ek's nie seker of hy al kan sê nie.”

Kaptein Hisel sug op 'n manier wat hom moeg en oud laat klink. “Jamie, nadat julle weg is, het ek en 'n paar van die ouens oor Jake gesels.” Hy aarsel. “Ek weet dit gaan absurd klink ... en ek wil jou nie ontstel nie, regtig nie.”

“Wat dit ook al is, sê my net.” Jamie hoor haarself 'n geforseeerde laggie gee.

“Wat is dit?”

“Jamie ... is jy seker hy is Jake?”

Die vraag maak dat haar knieë wil knak en haar bene dra haar vanself na die eetkamertafel. Sy gaan sit en leun op haar elmboë op die eikeblad. Toe sy uiteindelik 'n houvas op haarself het, is daar woede in haar stem. “Wat op aarde bedoel jy?”

“Jamie, die ou voel net nie soos Jake nie.” Die kaptein maak 'n gefrustreerde geluid. “Ek bedoel, hy lyk soos Jake en hy is omtrent dieselfde grootte. Maar iets aan sy gesig, sy ken. Ek weet nie, maar die ander ouens stem saam met my.” Hy bly stil. “Ek het net gewonder of jy seker is.”

Skielik is die ontstellende onsekerheid wat Jamie in die hospitaal ervaar het, in al sy felheid terug. Sy sien die woorde “O-negatief” op sy pasiëntekaart en die feit dat hy nie soos Jake praat of loop nie. En wat van Brownie? Selfs hulle ou hond het nie gelyk asof hy Jake aanvaar nie.

Al hierdie gedagtes dring hulle in 'n oogwenk aan haar op, maar sy verwerp hulle net so vinnig, verban hulle uit haar gedagtes en klem die telefoon stywer teen haar oor vas. “Luister, Kaptein ... ” In haar stem is daar 'n beheerste woede. “Sê vir die ouens by die stasie hulle kan gerus 'n bietjie meegevoel hê, oukei? Jake se dokter het gesê dat mense met amnesie nie heeltemal hulleself is voordat hulle geheue terugkom nie. Sy gesig lyk 'n bietjie anders omdat hy gewig verloor het. En Jake is nou eers besig om sy geheue terug te kry.”

“Ek weet, Jamie ... ek wou nie bel nie. Ek het net gedink dat jy dalk te na aan die situasie is om te sien wat die res van ons gesien het toe ... ”

“Asseblief, kaptein Hisel, hou op.” Jamie staan op en loop terug kombuis toe. “Ek het kos op die stoof. Dankie vir die bel.”

Sy wag nie vir die man se reaksie nie, maar beëindig die oproep. Die adrenalien bruis deur haar are en haar hart klop gejaagd. Haar hande en voorkop is klam van die sweet.

Sy kan nie glo die man is vermetel genoeg om so iets absurds te sê nie. Dink hy so 'n oproep sal haar laat beter voel? Haar gerusstel terwyl sy wag dat Jake begin onthou? Of is hy eenvoudig so selfgesentreerd dat hy nie verby die amnesie kan kyk en die man kan raaksien wat so hard probeer om die persoon te word wat hy eens was nie? Hoe dit ook al sy, Jamie kan nie glo hy het gebel nie.

Sy het nog nooit van so iets gemeens gehoor nie.

'n Paar minute later maak Jake en Sierra hand aan hand hulle verskyning. Sierra glimlag en huppel langs Jake, maar Jake se oë is troebel, die verwarring daarin groter as in weke. “Ek het nog een gehad.”

Sierra los sy hand en verdwyn na die swaai in die agterplaas.

Jamie staar na Jake en is skaars bewus daarvan dat die kind buitentoe is. “Nog 'n terugflits?”

Jake knik en leun teen die muur, sy oë in hare. “Dit raak al hoe duideliker, en is elke keer langer.”

Jamie se verhemelte is kurkdroog. “Wat ... wat sien jy?”

“Dieselfde goed.” Jake haal sy skouers op. “Ek hardloop by die trappe af en

ek val, 'n brandweerman help my op, maar wanneer ek na hom kyk, is dit soos om in 'n spieël te kyk.”

Die twyfel bombardeer haar van alle kante. Jamie maak haar oë toe en dink aan die Here. *Here ... ek haat dit om so te voel ... Neem asseblief hierdie aaklige gedagtes wat kaptein Hisel in my kop geplant het weg. Asseblief.* Sy maak haar mond oop om te praat, maar dit duur 'n paar sekondes voordat sy die vraag oor haar lippe kry. “Waarheen was die brandweerman op pad, die een wat jou gehelp het?”

Jake frons. “Wat bedoel jy?”

“Ek bedoel,” Jamie lek oor haar onderlip, “ek bedoel het hy boontoe of ondertoe gehardloop?”

Jake kyk vir 'n oomblik deur die venster en dan verdwyn sy frons. “Op.” Hy knik beslis en druk sy hande in sy broeksakke. “Hy was op pad boontoe.”

Die terugflits duur die volgende dag nog langer, en Jake deel die besonderhede met haar. Nadat die brandweerman – wat oënskynlik Jake is – hom opgehelp het, sien Jake 'n helm op die trappie, 'n helm met iets aan die binnekant geplak.

Jamie isangsbevange oor wat die terugflitse beteken en hoe dit met kaptein Hisel se onsekerhede ooreenkom. Sy begin Jake stip dophou, let op die manier waarop hy tandeborsel en sy hare kam, oordink die dosyne kleinigheidjies waaroor die kaptein reg was. Die man wat in haar huis bly, tree nié soos Jake Bryan op nie. Toe Jake een maal omdraai en haar oë op hom betrap, wip sy amper verskrik – asof sy uitgevang is dat sy na 'n vreemdeling kyk.

Ná daardie insident bid sy vir amper 'n uur, en die Here help haar om te ontspan. Nadat sy so lank aan sy bestaan getwyfel het, is dit eintlik ongelooflik dat dit so vinnig so natuurlik geword het om Hom aan te roep. Nie omdat sy veronderstel is nie, maar omdat dit die enigste manier is waarop sy vastigheid te midde van al die onsekerhede kan kry. Telkens wanneer sy bid, ervaar sy hoe haar twyfel vervaag, al is dit net in 'n mate.

Wat daarvan as Jake homself in die terugflits sien? Ten minste is hy deel van die herinnering, en dít moet tog 'n goeie teken wees. Jamie smee God om haar vrese geheel en al uit die weg te ruim, maar teen sonder voel sy hoe die spanning weer begin opbou. Sê nou kaptein Hisel is reg? Sê nou iemand het 'n fout gemaak en Jake is nie regtig Jake nie? Sy hou haar vrese vir haarself, maar hulle maak dit onmoontlik vir haar om te eet of te slaap.

Teen Vrydagaand voel dit asof sy van haar verstand af gaan.

Ná aandete verdwyn Jake en Sierra na die woonkamer waar hulle *Cinderella* in die videomasjien laai. Jamie trek 'n snoesige baadjie aan en het die telefoon pas opgetel toe Jake by die vertrek inloer. Sy glimlag is warm en gemoedelik. “Wat doen jy?”

Jamie voel soos 'n bedrieër. Sy sluk swaar en hou die telefoon op. “Ek wil gou vir Sue bel.”

“Oukei.” Hy knipoog vir haar en tel Sierra op sy skoot. “Ons wag vir jou.”

Die prentjie wat hy in sy gunstelingstoel met Sierra knus op sy skoot uitmaak,

is so bekend dat Jamie amper die foon neersit en by hulle gaan aansluit. Jake se gesig is steeds rooi en 'n bietjie skraler as voorheen. Sy stem is nog nie heeltemal normaal nie, ook nie sy liggaamshouding en taal nie. Maar die man is Jake; hy moet wees. Wat is die alternatief? Iemand anders wat net soos Jake lyk, was op presies dieselfde oomblik in die trapkuil ... iemand wat Sierra se naam en gesiggie geken het.

Dis onmoontlik.

Nietemin. Die paar kere wat sy met Sue gesels het sedert nou die aand se kuier het hulle nie oor Jake gepraat nie, buiten dat hulle saamstem hy lyk goed, alles in ag genome. Hulle het meer gepraat oor die soektog na Larry se liggaam en hoe swaar dit vir Katy is om haar pa se dood te verwerk. Jamie wou nie een maal aan haar irrasionele vrese en kaptein Hisel se opmerkings uiting gee nie.

Tot nou toe.

Nou het sy nodig om oor elke onsekerheid te praat, het sy nodig dat haar vriendin luister en haar gerusstel dat hierdie bizarre vrese heeltemal ongegrond is. Bowenal het Jamie perspektief nodig, en toe sy by die piekniektafel gaan sit, is dit presies wat sy van plan is om te kry.

Sue is by die huis en vir die eerste paar minute praat hulle oor nog twee brandweermanne se liggame wat in die puin opgespoor is. Toe daar 'n stilte is, maak Jamie keel skoon en kyk na die sterre bokant haar. Koue lug kom by haar baadjiekraag in en sy trek dit stywer om haar vas.

“Daar is iets wat ek vir jou wil sê ... iets van Jake.”

“Oukei.” Die angstigheid in Jamie se stem is genoeg om Sue dadelik ernstig te maak. “Wat van hom?”

“Kaptein Hisel het nou die dag gebel.” Jamie hou haar asem op. Sy gaan nie nou huil nie, nie terwyl sy so dringend nodig het om Sue te vertel wat die kaptein gesê het nie. “Hy ... hy en die ouens wonder of Jake regtig Jake is.” Sy bly stil. “Kan jy dit glo?”

“Dis ... absurd.” Sue huiwer net te lank. “Dink jy nie so nie?”

“Natuurlik. Dis waarom ek jou gebel het.”

Sue wag 'n oomblik. “Dink jy Jake tree vreemd op?”

Jamie wil opstaan en die telefoon oor die heining gooi. Dis met moeite dat sy die frustrasie uit haar stem hou. “Wat probeer jy sê?”

“Ek weet nie ... ek bedoel, jý dink hy is regtig Jake, nê?”

“Ja.” Jamie staan op en loop deur die tuin na waar haar beddings deur die herfs ingehaal word. Sy het gedink om Sue van Jake se vreemde terugflitse te vertel, maar aan die ander kant, sy het ook gedink dat Sue meer geskok op kaptein Hisel se oproep sou reageer. Dis amper asof daar 'n teenstrydigheid in haar vriendin is, asof 'n soort misverstand regtig moontlik was.

“Kyk, Sue, dit voel of ek besig is om van my kop af te gaan.” Sy kam haar vingers deur haar hare en draai om sodat sy met haar rug na die bedding staan. “Sê vir my ek het 'n paar af dae. Sê vir my dis normaal om te twyfel. Sê vir my Jake is wie ek dink hy is. Maar moenie dat ek hier in die wind rondfladder

nie.”

“Nou goed.” Sue se stem is sag en vol empatie. “Jy gaan deur ’n paar moeilike dae en dis normaal om te twyfel. Is dit beter?”

“Nee.” Jamie se mond hang oop en sy laat haarself teen die houtheyning terugval. “Nie as jy dit nie bedoel nie. Ek bedoel, wees eerlik met my, Sue, het dit vir jou gevoel of hy Jake is?”

“Wil jy die waarheid hoor?” Sue se stem breek.

“Ja ... ek moet.” Jamie se tande klap opmekaar, maar nie omdat dit koud is nie.

“Oukei.” ’n Bewerige sug weerklink aan die ander kant van die lyn. “Toe julle nou die aand hier weg is, het Katy na my toe gekom. Sy het iets gevra wat my nog die hele tyd pla.”

Jamie hou haar asem in. “Wat?”

“Sy het my gevra wie die man saam met jou en Sierra was.”

Die telefoon gly uit Jamie se hand en val op die grond. Sy steur haar nie aan die klam gras toe sy op haar knieë op die grond neersak en na die plek kyk waar die telefoon lê nie. *Haal asem, sê sy vir haarself. Dis net ’n droom, ’n nagmerrie, en ek gaan nou enige oomblik wakker word en almal sal weet wat die waarheid is. Dat Jake Bryan regtig is wie almal dink hy is.*

Uit die gehoorstuk kom daar ’n veraf stem. “Jamie ... Jamie, praat met my. Jamie, is jy nog daar?”

*Here ... help my. Ek ken U nog nie lank genoeg om te weet wat om te sê nie, maar help my. Hierdie ding is te groot vir my.*

*Van die woorde wat Jake in sy Bybel onderstreep het, kom by haar op. Kom na My toe, almal wat uitgeput en oorlaai is, en Ek sal julle rus gee. Neem my juk op julle en leer van My, want Ek is sagmoedig en nederig van hart, en julle sal rus kry vir julle gemoed.*

Jamie se kop draai. Sy maak haar oë toe en dwing haarself om haar asem bietjies-bietjies uit te blaas. Die stem roep steeds na haar. “Jamie ... tel op. Asseblief.”

Uiteindelik tas haar vingers oor die klam gras en kry sy die gehoorstuk raakgevat. Sy bring dit na haar oor toe en probeer dink wat sy moet sê. Beheer, dis wat sy nodig het. Die Here sal haar rus gee, maar sy sal ’n bietjie beheer moet neem. Sy hoes twee maal. “Sue ... ek’s ... ek’s jammer. Ek’s terug.”

“Jamie, is jy oukei? Ek kan oorkom as jy my nodig het.”

“Nee.” *Beheer ... beheer ... beheer ...* “Daar’s nie fout nie.” Sy maak haar mond oop en ’n sagte, vreemde laggie kom uit. “Die dokter het gesê dat Jake nie heeltemal homself gaan wees voordat hy sy geheue teruggekry het nie. Regtig, Sue ... sê vir Katy dat die man Sierra se pa was. En dat alles oukei is.” “Natuurlik.” Sue antwoord vinnig. “Ek bedoel, die man is Jake. Vanselfsprekend. Ek sê net dat Katy hom nie dadelik herken het nie, maar dis te verwagte met sy gebreekte enkel en brandwonde, die manier waarop hy ’n



bietjie anders praat en loop. Ek het nooit bedoel om ... ”

Jamie luister nie meer nie. Sue praat los en vas in ’n poging om te vergoed vir die feit dat sy Jamie laat skrik het. Toe sy klaar is, sluk Jamie en kyk weer op in die lug. “Dankie dat jy geluister het, Sue. Ek moet ingaan. Moenie bekommerd wees nie. Daar is nie fout nie. Ons kyk vanaand *Cinderella*.”

# Chapter THIRTY

NOVEMBER 12, 2001

There was no question Jamie was acting different around him.

Maybe it was the flashbacks, or something else Jake wasn't aware of. But she seemed distant and distracted, and several times he'd caught her staring at him. Her attitude didn't help ease his concerns—especially in light of the latest flashbacks.

The newest imagery started appearing over the weekend while Jake was taking a nap after church. His head had been hurting, so he sprawled out on the guest room bed. Almost as soon as he fell asleep, the flashback came. He was standing in an office talking to an older man, a man with white hair. They were in the World Trade Center surrounded by hundreds of office workers and looking out a window. There, in vivid colors, he could see balls of fire and billowing black smoke so close he could nearly touch them.

Then the memory had stopped, and Jake sat straight up in bed, out of breath as he stared at the closed bedroom door. What office had he been in, and who was the white-haired man? Why weren't firefighters in the picture, and how come he'd been able to see so clearly out the windows at the fire in the other building?

Nothing about the memory gelled with the idea that he'd been called to the scene with his Engine company and had headed up the stairs to help rescue survivors. Because if that had been the case, he wouldn't have been in an office, looking out a window. He would've been in a stairwell headed up until something—or someone—caused him to head back down.

Wouldn't he?

The flashbacks were supposed to help life make more sense, not less. And that night after Sierra was in bed, he found Jamie alone in the living room, sitting in a chair and facing out the front window. He came up behind her and worked his fingers into the base of her neck. “You okay?”

“Mmmm.” Jamie reached up and covered his hands with hers. “Just thinking.”

“About what?”

“Nothing.” The chair was a swivel rocker, and Jamie turned it so she was facing him. The whole time, she never let go of his hand, but the smile on her face looked unnatural. “Nothing in particular.”

Jake didn't believe her, but he wasn't about to force the discussion. Not when it might mean she'd get that strange look on her face again, the one that made him think something was wrong. And even though he'd have to tell her about his latest flashback at some point, now simply didn't seem the time. “I'm going to bed.” He bent down and kissed the top of her head. “Good night.”

She searched his eyes and continued to hold his hand. “Any memories, Jake? You know ... of the two of us?”

“No.” He gave her a sad, knowing look. They both wanted him to remember. It would be impossible to move forward until he did. “But things are happening in my brain. I can feel them. One of these days it'll all come rushing back, and we can be the way we were again.”

“Right. I know.” She nodded once.

Something about her face touched his heart. She was nothing more than a frightened little girl. He squeezed her hand and released it. “I'm begging God every night to help me remember. The moment I have anything for sure, you'll be the first to know.”

“Okay.” She worked the corners of her mouth up a notch. “Good night, Jake.”

He'd been asleep three hours when a different flashback hit. He was running down the stairwell as fast as he could, and the building was shaking. The sound of breaking windows and creaking walls filled his senses, and he doubled his pace, racing as fast as the crowd in front of him would let him. All of a sudden he could actually remember what he'd been thinking as he ran down the stairs.

He'd been praying. Asking God to let him have one more chance about something. He rolled over in bed, and in an instant another image flashed in his mind. A blonde woman and a little boy, maybe seven or eight years old. He was still tearing down the steps, one flight at a time, and now he knew why he wanted one more chance. It was something about the blonde woman and the little boy.

Then a horrible sound rang out all around him, and he screamed out loud. Not the kind of shout he'd let out after his first flashback. But a bone-chilling scream that had Jamie at his door in six seconds flat.

Again her face was pale. "Jake ... what is it?" She tore into the room and stood next to the bed, staring at him. "Is it a flashback?"

Jake opened his eyes and felt them grow wide. "Yes ..." His voice was breathy and filled with fear.

Jamie sat on the edge of his bed with several feet between them. "What did you remember?"

Jake's heart raced, and he felt as if he were falling off a cliff. Falling, falling as fast and far as he could to a place where certain death awaited him only moments away. Why weren't his memories headed in the direction he'd expected them to go? He'd studied everything in his journal, every notation in his Bible. All of it told him that when his past returned, it'd be of a terrifying moment trying to rescue someone from the south tower, and other than that they'd be of Jamie and Sierra, of fighting fires and hanging out with Larry. But the flashbacks he was having now contained none of that.

Who was the blonde woman and the little boy? Why had he been thinking about them as he tore down the stairs of the World Trade Center? Had he been unfaithful to Jamie? Or ...

He blinked and searched Jamie's face. She was still waiting, still staring at him, practically willing him to say that he remembered her, that everything about his past as Jake Bryan, firefighter and devoted father, was coming back to him.

But it wasn't. And because of that, he needed to tell Jamie the truth about his flashbacks. She'd know what to do, how to help him relax and make sense of the things he was remembering. Maybe he had a sister with blonde hair or a mother. Who could tell what his brain might do as it struggled to clear the fog from his memory?

They had both caught their breath now, and Jamie crossed her arms, her hands clenched. "Tell me what you remembered, Jake."

And then, without waiting another moment, Jake did just that. He started with the memory of himself talking with a white-haired man on one of the upper floors of the World Trade Center. "We rushed together through a series of offices to a bank of windows." He paused, his throat dry with fear. "That's when we saw the fire. It was huge—worse than anything I've seen on television about the attacks, Jamie." He placed his hand inches from his face. "It was right here. I could practically feel the heat."

"Is that what you remembered just now? When you screamed?"

He shook his head, and this time his mouth was dry. "It was something else." How could he tell her about the other flashback without terrifying her, without shaking her certainty that they'd ever find their way back to what they'd shared before? Or worse, without making her doubt that he really was the man he'd thought himself to be these past two months?

"What, Jake? Tell me." Her voice was a strained whisper, her face ashen. "I have to know."

"You're right." He reached for her hands and told her about the memory, how he had been running down the stairs as fast as he could go, taking one flight at a time and desperate to get out of the building. "That's when I begged God for one more chance with my family ... one more chance to make things right again."

"Right again?" Jamie shook her head and dug her fingernails into the palms of his hand. "You were always right, Jake. Everything about you."

He stared at her, his mouth open, heart frozen.

Jamie exhaled through pursed lips and hung her head between her knees for a moment. When she looked up she had just one question for him. "Did ... did you picture us? Me and Sierra? The people you wanted another chance with?"

He turned his head but kept his eyes on her. "I pictured two people ... but ..." Jake would've given anything to not finish the sentence. But it was too late now. The only way he could make sense of the strange memory was to share it with Jamie. No matter where that took them afterwards. "The people weren't you and Sierra."

Jamie let her head drop as she slid her hands over her ears and then down the tops of her thighs. She looked as though she might spring up at any moment and run from the room, but instead she found his eyes once more. "I ... I don't understand. Who were they?"

"I don't know." As frightened as the memories had made him feel, he was more concerned with Jamie's reaction. He put his hand on her shoulder and bit the inside of his lip. "The woman was taller than you ... with straight blonde hair. And the child ... was a boy. Maybe seven years old."

"Who ... who are they?" Jamie sucked in a sharp breath through her nose and shook her head several times.

"I thought you might know." He shrugged. "Like maybe she was a sister or a friend, someone married to one of the guys at the station." He hesitated, his eyes pleading with her. "Tell me you know who she is, please."

Jamie stood up then and backed away from him. Without saying another word, she turned and ran from the room. He could hear her bare feet patter across the entryway and tear out the front door into the yard. She sprinted away from the house as fast as she could and after a few seconds the sound faded to silence. Jake thought about going after her, but whatever process she was working through, she needed to do so without his help.

He sat stone still, waiting to hear her footsteps again. When she didn't come back after a few minutes, he climbed out of bed and paced the room.

His boot cast had been removed two days earlier, and his ankle was still tender. But in that moment, he didn't care about the pain. He walked over to the dresser and scanned the photographs.

All he wanted were answers.

Somewhere there had to be a blonde woman. Why else would he have remembered her? And what about the little boy? One of the pictures must've contained the image of him—maybe sitting on the lap of a favorite uncle or long-lost friend.

Without thinking Jake pulled open the top drawer.

What he saw there surprised him. All this time living in the guest room and he'd never looked in any of the dresser drawers. This one was filled almost to the brim with dusty old, framed photographs. Jake was ready to race through the lot of them, when his eyes fell on a simple five-by-seven near the top of the stack. It was a picture of a man in a firefighter's uniform. But that wasn't what caught Jake's eyes.

It was the man's helmet.

With almost trancelike precision, Jake lifted the photo from the drawer and stared at the firefighter. Clearly the man was supposed to be him, but something about the helmet set off a flashback that until that moment had been incomplete. Once more he could see himself falling in the stairwell, feel himself being helped to his feet by a man who turned out to be a firefighter. Again, the uniformed man looked identical to himself, but this time the firefighter's helmet fell off, and Jake picked it up. The scene was so real in his mind, it made his head hurt. As he handed the helmet back to the firefighter, Jake saw Sierra's photo taped to the inside. Beneath the picture was her name, scribbled in big block letters.

Jake could see the little girl's image as clearly as he must've seen it that awful Tuesday morning. The flashback continued, and he remembered looking up, catching the firefighter's eyes, and thinking something very strange, something that hadn't been a part of the flashback until just that instant.

The thought was this: Never in his life had he seen someone who looked so much like himself.

Footsteps sounded near the door, and Jake looked up. It was Jamie. Her eyes were red and swollen, but she was more in control than she'd been fifteen minutes ago. She walked toward him, never taking her gaze from his face. When she was just a few feet away, she narrowed her eyes and whispered the same question that was suddenly shouting at him.

“Who ... who are you?”

His heart pounded in his chest, but he could do nothing to save her, nothing to erase the doubts for either of them. Instead, he merely set the photograph down and gave a slow shake of his head. “I don't know, Jamie. I really don't know.”

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The answer was simple.

The next morning Jamie called Dr. Cleary, and in sentences broken with tears, she explained about Jake's flashbacks. “What if it's not him? How could we find out?”

The doctor had answered with the obvious. “Didn't you say he had a rare blood type?”

“Yes.” Jamie massaged her temples and tried to ease her aching head. “AB-positive.”

Dr. Cleary sighed. “I really don't think you have anything to worry about. But since you're both having doubts, go down to University Hospital and have his blood drawn. I'll call in the order, and they should have the results in about thirty minutes.”

“Right now?” Jamie closed her eyes and steadied herself against the kitchen counter.

“Right now.”

When she hung up the phone, she took Sierra across the street to the neighbor's. “Jake has to do some testing at the hospital.”

Her neighbor was more than agreeable. “Take your time. I'm home



the rest of the day.”

Five minutes later she and Jake were on their way. Jamie drove and kept her thoughts to herself. The idea that the family in his mind was a blonde woman and a young boy was terrifying. It made her want to turn around and drive the other direction, as fast and far away from the hospital and the blood test as possible. To a place where the man beside her would be Jake Bryan, no questions asked ever again. But running wouldn't make the problem go away.

Jake slipped his hand in hers and squeezed once. “You okay?”

She nodded and blinked. Her throat was too thick to speak, and Jake seemed to understand. She could barely breathe for the tears fighting their way from her eyes. But she wouldn't cry; not now. Maybe this was just a crazy thing they were doing. Maybe the flashbacks would make sense in time. She ran her thumb along the side of Jake's hand.

*But if not ...*

The hospital was just around the corner, and still neither she nor Jake had said a word to each other. They pulled into the hospital's front lot and found a place to park. Only then did Jake turn toward her and touch her cheek. “Jamie ...”

She found his damp eyes and allowed herself to get lost in them. His gaze went to the deepest place of her heart.

“Whatever happens in there, I'm here for you. You have to believe that.”

Jamie studied him and willed away the tears that blurred her own eyes. He had to be Jake, didn't he? Those were Jake's words, Jake's tenderness. His way of caring for her above himself, especially when she was afraid. She leaned closer, and they came together in an embrace that seemed to last an hour and an instant all at once. As though neither of them wanted to climb out of the car and take the chance that somehow—in the span of half an hour—everything they had believed about their future together would suddenly and swiftly vanish.

She was the one who pulled back first. "Let's go." Her eyes met his, soaking in the face she still believed was her husband's. "We have to find out."

The test took only twenty minutes. Jamie and Jake were holding hands in the lobby when a nurse approached them. She had a white piece of paper in her hands. "Mr. Bryan?"

Jake stood up and Jamie joined him, leaning against him for support. The nurse's face was calm and pleasant looking. *She has no idea*, Jamie thought. *One way or another, the information she's about to give us will change our lives forever.*

The woman handed the piece of paper to Jake, and Jamie craned her neck to read the details. *Come on, where is it?* Her eyes darted across the page. *His name ... his birth date ... his age ...* lines and lines of information, but not the part they needed. Jamie wanted to scream.

*Where was the blood type?*

After only a few seconds, Jake looked at the nurse and shook his head. "I can't read it." His voice was urgent, almost impatient. "We're trying to find out my blood type."

Jamie closed her eyes. *AB-positive ... his blood type is AB-positive, God ... let her tell us that, please.*

"Let's see ..." The nurse took the paper back again and glanced at it for just a moment. "Well, you're one of the lucky ones." She handed the paper to Jake once more and smiled. "You're O-negative. The most common blood type of all."

## Dertig

12 November 2001

Daar bestaan geen twyfel dat Jamie anders teenoor hom optree nie. Dalk is dit die terugflitse, of iets anders waarvan Jake nie bewus is nie. Maar sy voel afsydig en afgetrokke en hy betrap haar 'n paar maal dat sy na hom staar. Haar houding help nie om sy onrus te stil nie – veral nie teen die agtergrond van die jongste terugflits nie.

Die nuutste beelde het oor die naweek begin verskyn toe Jake ná kerk 'n rukkie gaan lê het. Sy kop was seer en hy het op die bed in die gastekamer gaan rus. Hy het net weggeraak toe hy die terugflits kry. Hy staan in 'n kantoor met 'n ouer man en praat, 'n man met wit hare. Hulle is in die World Trade Center tussen honderde kantoorwerkers wat voor die venster saamdrom. Buitekant, in helder kleure, sien hy vlamme en rookwolke, so naby dat hy amper daaraan kan vat.

Die volgende oomblik was dit verby, en Jake het uitasem regop gesit en na die toe kamerdeur gestaar. In watter kantoor was hy en wie was die witkopman? Waarom was daar nie brandweermanne in die prentjie nie, en hoekom kon hy die vuur in die ander gebou so duidelik deur die venster sien?

Daar is niks aan die herinnering wat strook met die idee dat hy en sy makkers na die toneel ontbied is en met die trappe boontoe is om oorlewendes te red nie, want as dit die geval was, sou hy nie in 'n kantoor gestaan en deur 'n venster gekyk het nie. Hy sou in 'n trapkuil op pad boontoe gewees het totdat iets – of iemand – gemaak het dat hy weer ondertoe moes gaan.

Of hoe?

Die terugflitse is veronderstel om die lewe meer sin te laat maak, nie minder nie. En toe Sierra daardie aand in die bed is, kry hy Jamie alleen in die woonkamer waar sy op 'n draaistoel voor die venster sit. Hy loop tot agter haar en begin haar nek saggies masseer. “Is jy oukei?”

“Mmmm.” Jamie lig haar hand en plaas dit oor syne. “Ek dink sommer net.”

“Waarom dink jy?”

“Niks nie.” Jamie draai om sodat sy na hom kyk, haar hand steeds op syne, maar haar glimlag lyk onnatuurlik. “Niks spesifiek nie.”

Jake glo haar nie, maar hy is nie van plan om 'n gesprek op haar af te dwing nie. Nie as dit beteken dat sy weer daardie vreemde kyk op haar gesig kry nie, die een wat hom laat dink iets is fout. En selfs al moet hy haar op die een of ander tydstip van die laaste terugflits vertel, voel dit nie nou na die regte tyd nie. “Ek gaan inkruip.” Hy buk en soen haar op haar hare. “Lekker slaap.”

Sy kyk ondersoekend in sy oë sonder om sy hand te laat gaan. “Is daar al enige herinneringe, Jake? Jy weet ... van ons twee?”

“Nee.” Sy kyk is hartseer. Hulle albei wil hê hy moet onthou. Dis onmoontlik om aan te beweeg terwyl dit nie gebeur nie. “Maar daar is allerhande woelinge in my brein. Ek kan dit voel. Een van hierdie dae gaan alles terugkom en sal dit weer soos voorheen wees.”

“Ja. Ek weet.”

Iets aan haar gesig pluk aan sy hart. Sy is maar net 'n bang klein dogtertjie. Hy gee haar hand 'n drukkie en laat dit gaan. “Ek pleit elke nag by die Here om my te help onthou. Die oomblik as ek enigiets konkreet het, sal jy die eerste een wees wat daarvan hoor.”

“Oukei.” Haar mondhoëke lig baie effens. “Lekker slaap, Jake.”

Dis diep in die nag toe hy 'n nuwe terugflits kry. Hy is besig om met die trappe af te hardloop terwyl die gebou wieg. Daar is 'n geraas van ruite wat

breek en mure wat kraak, en hy hardloop nog vinniger, so vinnig as wat die mense voor hom hom toelaat. Skielik onthou hy wat deur sy gedagtes gegaan het terwyl hy by die trappe afgehardloop het.

Hy het gebid. God gevra om hom nog 'n kans te gee. Hy draai om en die volgende oomblik flits nog 'n beeld deur sy gedagtes. 'n Blonde vrou en 'n seuntjie van so sewe of agt. Hy is steeds besig om holderstebolder met die trap af te hardloop, en toe besef hy waarom hy nog 'n kans wil hê. Dit het iets met die blonde vrou en klein seuntjie te doen.

Daar is 'n afskuwelike geluid en hy skree. Dis nie die soort gil waarmee hy ná sy eerste terugflits wakker geword het nie. Maar 'n bloedstollende gil wat Jamie ses sekondes later by sy deur het.

Sy is so bleek soos 'n laken. “Jake ... wat is dit?” Sy storm die kamer binne en kyk met wydgerekte oë na hom. “Was dit 'n terugflits?”

Jake maak sy oë oop en voel hoe hulle rek. “Ja ... ” Sy stem is asemrig en vol vrees.

Jamie kom sit op die punt van die bed 'n entjie van hom af. “Wat het jy onthou?”

Jake se hart klop vinnig en dit voel asof hy by 'n afgrond afstort. Hy val vinnig en ver na 'n plek waar 'n gewisse dood binne sekondes op hom wag. Waarom beweeg sy herinneringe nie in die rigting waarheen hy verwag nie? Hy het alles in sy dagboek, elke aantekening in sy Bybel bestudeer. Alles dui daarop dat wanneer sy verlede terugkom, dit van 'n verskriklike oomblik sal wees waarin hy iemand uit die suidelike toring probeer red, en andersins van Jamie en Sierra, van sy werk as brandweerman en kuiers met Larry. Maar sy terugflitse bevat niks daarvan nie.

Wie is die blondine en die klein seuntjie? Waarom het hy aan hulle gedink terwyl hy met die trappe in die World Trade Center afgekom het? Was hy ontrou aan Jamie? Of ...

Hy knip sy oë en kyk soekend na Jamie. Sy wag nog steeds vir hom, 'n dringendheid in haar oë. Dis asof sy hom smEEK om te sê hy onthou haar, dat alles van sy verlede as Jake Bryan, brandweerman en toegewyde pa, na hom toe terugkom.

Maar dis nie die geval nie. En dit beteken dat hy Jamie sal moet vertel wat in sy terugflitse gebeur. Sy sal weet wat om te doen, hoe om hom te help ontspan en van sy herinneringe sin te maak. Miskien het hy 'n suster of 'n ma met blonde hare. Wie weet wat alles in sy kop aangaan terwyl sy brein deur die mistigheid in sy geheue moet werk?

Hulle sit albei sonder om asem te haal en Jamie vou haar arms. Jake merk dat haar hande in vuiste is. “Vertel my wat jy onthou, Jake.”

Hy talm nie langer nie, maar begin vertel. Hy begin met die herinnering van homself wat met 'n witkopman in een van die hoë verdiepings van die World Trade Center praat. “Ons het saam deur 'n klomp kantore na 'n ry vensters toe gehardloop.” Hy bly stil, sy keel stram van vrees. “Dis toe ons die vuur gesien het. Dit was massief – groter as enigiets wat ek op televisie oor die aanvalle

gesien het, Jamie.” Hy hou sy hand sentimeters van haar gesig af. “Dit was net hier. Ek kon amper die hitte voel.”

“Is dit wat jy sopas onthou het? Toe jy geskree het?”

Hy skud sy kop, en hierdie keer is sy mond droog. “Dit was iets anders.” Hoe kan hy haar van die ander terugflits vertel sonder om haar angsbevange te maak, sonder om haar geloof te knak dat hulle ooit weer gaan vind wat daar eens tussen hulle was? Of erger nog, sonder om haar te laat twyfel dat hy regtig die man is wat hy die afgelope twee maande gedink het hy is?

“Wat, Jake? Sê vir my.” Haar stem is ’n gespanne fluistering, haar gesig wasbleek. “Ek moet weet.”

“Jy’s reg.” Hy neem haar hande en vertel haar van die herinnering, hoe hy so vinnig moontlik by die trappe afgestorm het, desperaat om uit die gebou te kom. “Ek het God vir nog ’n kans gesmeek ... nog ’n kans om dinge met my gesin weer reg te maak.”

“Reg te maak?” Jamie skud haar kop en hy voel hoe haar vingernaels in sy handpalms invreet. “Alles was reg, Jake. Daar was niks om reg te maak nie.”

Hy staar na haar, sy mond oop, sy hart versteen.

Jamie blaas haar asem uit en laat haar kop vir ’n oomblik tussen haar knieë hang. Toe sy opkyk, het sy net een vraag vir hom. “Het jy ons gesien? Vir my en Sierra? Die mense met wie jy nog ’n kans wou hê?”

Hy forseer homself om in haar oë te kyk. “Ek het twee mense gesien ... maar ... ” Jake sou enigiets gee om die sin nie klaar te maak nie. Maar nou is dit te laat. Die enigste manier waarop hy van hierdie vreemde herinnering kan sin maak, is om Jamie daarvan te vertel. Maak nie saak waar dit hulle laat nie. “Dit was nie jy en Sierra nie.”

Jamie se kop val vorentoe en sy hou haar hande vir ’n oomblik oor haar ore voordat sy hulle op haar bobene laat val. Dit lyk asof sy enige oomblik gaan opspring en by die kamer uitstorm, maar haar oë soek na syne. “Ek ... ek verstaan nie. Wie was hulle?”

“Ek weet nie.” Hoe bang die herinneringe hom ook al maak, hy is meer bekommerd oor Jamie se reaksie. Hy plaas sy hand op haar skouer en byt aan die binnekant van sy lip. “Die vrou was langer as jy ... met reguit, blonde hare. En die kind ... was ’n seuntjie. So sewe jaar oud.”

“Wie ... wie is hulle?” Jamie trek haar asem skerp in en skud haar kop ’n paar maal.

“Ek het gedink jy sal dalk weet.” Hy haal sy skouers op. “Dat sy dalk ’n suster of ’n vriendin was, iemand wat met een van die ouens by die stasie getroud is.” Hy aarsel en kyk pleitend na haar. “Sê vir my jy weet wie sy is, asseblief.” Jamie staan op en begin retireer. Sonder om ’n verdere woord te sê, hardloop sy by die kamer uit. Hy hoor haar kaal voete oor die vloer en by die voordeur uithardloop. Sy hardloop so vinnig moontlik van die huis af en ná ’n paar sekondes kan hy haar nie meer hoor nie. Jake oorweeg dit om haar te volg, maar besef sy moet op haar eie wees om te verwerk wat sy sopas gehoor het. Hy sit doodstil en wag met gespitste ore. Toe sy na ’n paar minute nog nie

terug is nie, klim hy uit die bed en loop op en af in die kamer. Sy spalk is twee dae gelede verwyder en sy enkel is nog gevoelig. Maar hy steur hom nie nou aan die pyn nie. Hy loop na die spieëltafel en kyk na die foto's.

Hy moet antwoorde kry.

Iewers moet daar 'n blonde vrou wees. Om watter ander rede sou hy haar onthou het? En wat van die klein seuntjie? Hy moet iewers op een van die foto's wees – dalk op die skoot van 'n geliefde oom of by 'n langverlore vriend.

Jake trek die boonste laai oop sonder om te dink.

Hy is verras deur wat hy sien. Gedurende die baie weke in die gastekamer het hy nog nooit enige van die tafel se laaie oopgemaak nie. Hierdie een is vol stowwerige ou, geraamde foto's. Jake is op die punt om hulle almal deur te gaan toe sy oog op een van die boonste foto's val. 'n Man in 'n brandweeruniform pryk op die foto, maar dis nie wat Jake se oog vang nie.

Dis die man se helm.

Asof in 'n beswyming tel Jake die foto op en staar na die brandweerman. Die man is duidelik veronderstel om hy te wees, maar iets aan die helm aktiveer 'n terugflits wat tot dusver onvolledig was. Hy sien homself weer op die trappe val, voel hoe hy deur 'n man in 'n brandweeruniform opgehelp word. Die brandweerman lyk weer identies soos hy, maar hierdie keer val die man se helm af, en Jake tel dit op. Die toneel is so intens realisties dat sy kop begin pyn. Toe hy die helm vir die man teruggee, sien Jake 'n foto van Sierra binnekant die helm vasgeplak. Onder die foto is haar naam in groot blokletters neergeskryf.

Jake sien die dogtertjie se gesig net so duidelik soos wat hy dit daardie aaklige Dinsdagoggend moes sien. In die terugflits sien hy hoe hy opkyk, die brandweerman se oë vang en iets baie vreemds dink, iets wat nou vir die eerste keer deel van die terugflits is.

Die gedagte is: Hy het nog nooit iemand gesien wat so baie na hom lyk nie.

Jake hoor voetstappe en kyk op. Dis Jamie. Haar oë is geswel en rooi gehuil, maar sy lyk meer in beheer as vyftien minute gelede. Sy kom nader sonder om haar oë van syne weg te neem. Toe sy net 'n paar meter van hom af is, vernou sy haar oë en fluister dieselfde vraag wat skielik in sy eie binneste skree.

“Wie ... wie is jy?”

Sy hart klop swaar, maar hy kan niks doen om haar te help nie, niks om die twyfel vir hom of haar uit te wis nie. Al wat hy doen, is om die foto neer te sit en sy kop stadig te skud. “Ek weet nie, Jamie. Eerlikwaar, ek weet nie.”

Die oplossing is eenvoudig.

Die volgende oggend bel Jamie vir dr. Cleary en in gebroke sinne verduidelik sy Jake se terugflitse. “Sê nou dis nie hy nie? Hoe kan ons uitvind?”

Die dokter se antwoord is voor die hand liggend. “Het jy nie gesê dat hy 'n seldsame bloedgroep het nie?”

“Ja.” Jamie vryf oor haar slape in 'n poging om haar kloppende hoofpyn te stil. “AB-positief.”

Dr. Cleary sug. “Ek dink regtig nie julle het rede tot kommer nie. Maar aangesien julle albei onseker is, stel ek voor julle gaan na die University Hospital toe en laat sy bloed trek. Ek sal die toets laat doen en julle behoort die uitslag binne dertig minute te hê.”

“Nou dadelik?” Jamie maak haar oë toe en leun teen die kombuistoonbank.

“Nou dadelik.”

Toe sy aflui, neem sy Sierra na die bure oorkant die straat. “Ek moet Jake hospitaal toe neem vir toetse.”

Haar buurvrou is meer as tegemoetkomend. “Neem julle tyd. Ek is die res van die dag by die huis.”

Vyf minute later is sy en Jake op pad. Jamie bestuur en hou haar gedagtes vir haarself. Die idee dat die gesin in sy gedagtes ’n blonde vrou en ’n klein seuntjie bevat, maak haar waansinnig van vrees. Dit maak dat sy wil omdraai en in die teenoorgestelde rigting ry, so vinnig en ver moontlik van die hospitaal en bloedtoetse af. Iewers heen waar die man langs haar Jake Bryan sal wees, waar daar nooit weer enige vroe gevra sal word nie. Maar om te vlug, sal nie maak dat die probleem weggaan nie.

Jake steek sy hand uit en gee hare ’n drukkie. “Is jy oukei?”

Sy knip haar oë en knik. Sy is te na aan trane om te praat en dit lyk of Jake verstaan. Sy kan skaars asemhaal, so vlak sit die trane. Maar sy sal nie huil nie; nie nou nie. Dalk is hulle oorhaastig. Dalk sal die terugflitse mettertyd begin sin maak. Sy streel met haar duim oor Jake se hand.

*Maar indien nie ...*

Die hospitaal is net om die hoek en hulle praat nie in die motor nie. By die hospitaal aangekom, kry hulle maklik parkeerplek. Nadat hulle stilgehou het, draai Jake na haar en raak aan haar wang. “Jamie ...”

Sy raak weg in sy traanblink oë. Sy blik reik tot in die verste hoekies van haar hart.

“Wat ook al daarbinne gebeur, ek’s hier vir jou. Jy moet dit glo.”

Jamie bestudeer sy gesig en baklei teen die trane wat haar eie oë wasig maak. Hoe kan hy nie Jake wees nie? Dis Jake se woorde, Jake se teerheid. Sy manier om haar behoeftes bo sy eie te stel, veral as sy bang is. Sy leun oor en hulle hou mekaar vas vir wat tegelykertyd soos ’n leeftyd en ’n sekonde voel. Asof nie een van hulle wil uitklim en die gevaar loop dat alles wat hulle oor hulle toekoms geglo het, binne ’n kwessie van ’n halfuur sal disintegreer nie. Dis sy wat haar uit die omhelsing losmaak. “Kom ons gaan in.” Jamie kyk na hom en sy verdrink in die oë wat sy steeds glo aan haar man behoort. “Ons moet weet.”

Die toets neem net twintig minute. Jamie en Jake hou hande vas in die portaal toe ’n verpleegster na hulle toe kom. Daar is ’n wit bladsy in haar hand. “Meneer Bryan?”

*Jake staan op en Jamie leun teen hom vir ondersteuning. Die verpleegster het ’n ontspanne, vriendelike gesig. Sy het nie die vaagste benul nie, dink Jamie. Op die een of ander manier gaan die inligting wat sy nou vir hulle gee, hulle*

*lewe vir altyd verander.*

Die vrou gee die papier vir Jake, en Jamie rek haar nek om te kan lees wat daar staan. *Kom nou, waar is dit?* Haar oë vlieg oor die papier. *Sy naam ... sy geboortedatum ... sy ouderdom ...* Alles buiten wat hulle nodig het. Jamie wil skree.

*Waar is die bloedgroep?*

Na 'n paar sekondes kyk Jake na die verpleegster en skud sy kop. “Ek kry dit nie.” Sy stem is dringend, amper ongeduldig. “Ons probeer uitvind wat my bloedgroep is.”

*Jamie maak haar oë toe. AB-positief ... sy bloedgroep is AB-positief, Here ... asseblief, laat sy dit vir ons sê.*

“Kom ons kyk ... ” Die verpleegster neem die bladsy terug en kyk vir net 'n oomblik daarna. “Lyk my jy's een van die gelukkiges.” Sy gee die bladsy weer vir Jake en glimlag. “Jy's O-negatief. Die heel algemeenste bloedgroep.”



# Chapter THIRTY-ONE

NOVEMBER 12, 2001

They collapsed together on a bench outside the hospital.

Jamie had no memory of how they'd gotten there, just that they were. The realization of the blood results hit her in waves. The first nearly knocked her to her knees. The man she'd been living with since the end of September was not Jake Bryan, but someone else, someone who merely looked like him.

The second realization took a minute to sink in, but by the time they reached the bench and sat down, it hit her full force.

If that man beside her wasn't her husband, then ...

She buried her face in her hands, her body shaking so badly she could barely stay seated. "No, Jake ... No! God, please ... not Jake." Her words were drenched in grief and the quiet, desperate sound of a person in shock. But this time the person wasn't someone on television or someone pasting flyers on a wall in New York City. It wasn't one of the other firefighter wives—it was her.

Jamie Bryan.

The thing she had feared all of her life had actually happened, and she hadn't known it until now. Next to her, the man who looked so much like her husband placed his hand on her back and brought his head close to hers. "I'm sorry, Jamie ... I'm so sorry."

Part of her wanted to fall into his arms, take the slip of white paper he still held in his other hand, rip it into a hundred pieces, and dump it in the nearest trash can—where it belonged. But somewhere in the soil of her conscious, the truth had taken root and there was nothing she could do but watch it grow.

Of course the man next to her wasn't her husband. He hadn't had a firefighter's uniform on, not even his helmet. Why hadn't that sounded crazy to her before? Jake might've taken his uniform off so he could run

faster, but he would've at least kept his helmet. After all, the sky was raining debris from the Twin Towers—bodies, steel beams, broken glass.

At first—back when they were in the hospital—Captain Hisel had said that Jake's helmet must have fallen off his head in the blast. But if that was true, why hadn't they found it? All of it made sense now.

Sobs broke free and shook Jamie until she was almost certain she was going to throw up. Of course they hadn't found Jake's helmet. It was still on his head, still buried with him somewhere in the pile of debris. No doubt next to the body of Larry. The irony was as painful as it was sweet. She'd ignored that sign too. The fact that Jake would've been with Larry. The two never would've separated, even if it meant they both had to walk a single victim down the stairs before joining the rest of their men.

“Jake ...” The word was a moan, a cry that came from the depths of her soul. “Why, God ... why?”

In all her recent days of doubting the truth about the identity of the man she'd been living with, she'd never allowed herself to take the possibility this far, never acknowledged the fact that if the man wasn't really Jake, then Jake was dead. She'd never see him again, never kiss him or hold him.

Hadn't she noticed the same things Captain Hisel had seen? The subtly different shape of the man's face, the differences in his mannerisms? Had it been merely wishful thinking to believe that somehow when the man in the guest room regained his memory he would magically turn into the Jake Bryan she'd loved since sixth grade?

Jamie cried until she couldn't breathe, mourning the loss of the strapping man who'd been everything to her—her mentor and protector, her lover and friend. The most amazing father a little girl could ever hope to have.

Thoughts of Sierra made the sobs come twice as fast. What would happen now? And how would she break the news to the carefree child, especially when the little girl had no doubts that the man who came home

from the hospital with them was anyone less than her wonderful daddy?

The entire mess was more complicated than Jamie could begin to work through. And there was something else too. What would happen to the man beside her? Suddenly, it hit her that he had nowhere to go, no one to turn to. For nearly three months he'd been training himself to be Jake Bryan, and even though the blood test told him he was someone else, neither of them had any idea who that person was.

The tears slowed, and after what felt like a lifetime, Jamie strained back to a sitting position. It was impossible to sit straight, her shoulders bowed as though a mountain had grown across the back of them. After a moment she looked up and found the eyes of the man next to her. His face was wet, his eyes red. Sorrow and confusion, guilt and grief were among the emotions swimming there.

"I'm sorry ... about Jake," he said, his voice strained and more than a little terrified.

They came together in a hug then, an embrace that was different from the one they'd shared in the car. This time it was the embrace of two people lost in a world gone mad, a world in which they suddenly had only each other to understand the pain life had dealt them.

"We still ..." She sniffed and pulled back, taking his hand in hers. The touch of his skin felt comfortable, but not sensual, as though even her senses finally realized the truth about his real identity. "We still don't know who you are."

"No."

"And somewhere you probably have a ... a blonde wife and a little boy. Don't you think?"

He nodded, and fresh tears welled in his eyes. "My memory tells me that, but right now ... I still feel like I'm married to you." His gaze drifted to a distant row of trees and then back to her. "Like I'm still Sierra's daddy."

"What are we supposed to do?" Jamie sounded like a child herself as

she searched the man's face. "Where would you go?"

For a long while he said nothing, just looked at her. Then he angled his head, his eyes pleading with her. "Can I stay with you, Jamie? Until I remember."

Tears blurred her vision once more, and she stared straight up at the sky. A cry came from her, and she shook her head. *God ... how can You ask this of me? To share my life with someone who looks so much like Jake he takes my breath away?*

A line from the sermon that past week flashed in her mind. *Love one another ... as I have loved you, so you must love one another.*

*Love?*

Jamie closed her eyes and tried to make sense of the notion. Her heart was utterly broken, her life forever changed. In what way would Christ's love help her find the strength to love a stranger? One who looked exactly like her dead husband? And what would be the point?

Then ... as though God was speaking the words directly to her soul ... the answer came. Jesus had loved her with His entire being. He had laid down His life so that she might live. And now that's what God wanted her to do for the man beside her. Love him ... in a way that meant laying down her own feelings, giving up her own pain. She must ignore the canyon of grief within her and help him find his way home. Even if it killed her.

All so that someday he might find life again.

She opened her eyes and found his face once more, studied his eyes, the fear and anticipation there as she considered her answer. Then she took his hands in hers and felt the corners of her mouth inch their way up her swollen cheeks. "Yes ... you can stay with me until you remember." She drew a breath and felt a supernatural presence within her, holding her up and sustaining her, preparing her for the painful times ahead. "I know you're not Jake ... and I know our time together will be short." She grabbed two quick breaths. "You're not my husband and ... and you're not Sierra's daddy." She paused, breathing in the sight of him, doing everything

in her power to convince herself that he really wasn't Jake. "I have just one request."

"Okay." The kind man's eyes swam with tears as their eyes held. "Anything."

"Please ... as long as you're living with us ... don't tell Sierra the truth."

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With each passing hour, the shock echoed more loudly across the arid plains of Jamie's heart. By the end of the first night she knew she was still breathing because of God's strength alone. The nurse's words sounded in her mind at least every minute or so.

You're one of the lucky ones.... O-negative ... the most common blood type of all. You're one of the lucky ones ... lucky ones ...

How was it possible?

Jake had died, and she hadn't even mourned his death, hadn't even known that his body was one of the thousands crushed in the collapse of the towers. Would she have gone to Ground Zero, or maybe stayed at the station waiting for word? She would've been crazy with fear, desperate for news. But eventually she would've known, and then she would've grieved with the other firefighter wives. She and Sue would've sat together at the memorial services, each of them holding the other up when standing was no longer an option.

But Jamie had missed all of it.

The next day, morning had the nerve to come, having no respect for her feelings, and bringing with it all the awful reality of her life. That the man in the downstairs guest room, the one who looked and talked and smelled like her husband, the one who even thought like him, wasn't him at all, but a perfect stranger.

Jamie imagined that in firefighter households across the city a proper time of grieving was taking place. But not here, not now. Absent were the phone calls from friends, the comfort of family. Her public grieving would

have to wait until the man downstairs—whoever he was—found his way home. Only then could she admit to Jake's buddies, to Captain Hisel and Jake's father, that the man they'd prayed for and held bedside vigil for was not the man they knew and loved.

She'd spent the past two months living with another woman's husband. Meanwhile, Jake was gone ... he was gone. Lost forever. A part of her wanted to get dressed and head for Ground Zero, the place firefighters were calling “the pile.” Maybe they'd found something—his body or his helmet. His wedding ring.

The morning sun streamed through the window, and she rolled over onto Jake's side of the bed. His pillowcase didn't smell like him anymore, but she buried her face in it anyway. If she'd known he wasn't coming home, she never would've washed it. She moaned his name into the fibers of the pillow and felt another wave of sobs come over her.

*I'm sorry, Jake ... God, let him know I'm sorry ... I didn't know. I would've been there looking for him myself, waiting for him. Willing him to live. Oh, God ... I'm sorry. I can't do this ...*

*Daughter, I'm with you always ... even now.*

The thought was the faintest breeze in the still, dark place where her heart once lived. They were Jake's words ... words she'd seen in his journal. Or maybe the words were from God. Yes ... that had to be it. They were highlighted in Jake's Bible. God was with her, and that was at least some comfort.

But that didn't ease the pain.

She still clung to Jake's pillowcase. She wanted to stay buried there, but she had to breathe. The pillow was soggy from her tears, and she stared at their wedding photo, the one on Jake's bedside nightstand. “Jake, why ...” She ached all over, and her words were muffled and blurred. “You told me God wasn't finished with you ... that nothing ... nothing would happen to you.”

A sound made its way up the stairs, and she held her breath for a

moment and wiped at her tears. Sierra! She was awake and moving around downstairs in the kitchen. Probably about to find the man in the guest room and wake him up, beg another horsey ride. The man she thought was her daddy.

It was time to dry her tears and begin pretending.

“Daddy ... where are you? Time to get up.” Her daughter's voice filtered up the stairs, each word a dart to the centermost part of Jamie's soul.

*God ... help me ...*

She moved like someone who'd aged a hundred years overnight, but she managed to climb out of bed. The covers couldn't hide the truth about her life. Just when she thought it might all go back to normal, now it was unraveling before her eyes. And besides, the man who looked like Jake needed her. Thirty minutes later she had showered and dressed and applied enough makeup to hide her swollen eyes.

As ready as she'd ever be to face the day, her first day as a widow. Her first day without Jake.

They had a few things to work out, and Jamie wanted a plan sooner than later.

After breakfast they agreed she would continue to call him Jake so Sierra wouldn't be confused. In addition, they had to consider the guys at the fire station and people at church.

“The newspapers will have a field day with this story if we let the truth out now.” Jamie shared that with him over breakfast. She dragged her hand over the air above her head. “‘Mistaken Identity Leaves Man Without a Home.’ We can't do that.”

“So what's the answer?”

The only solution that would work for everyone was an obvious one. They would simply have to pretend. Until he remembered enough details to find his way home, they would act as if he were Jake. He would spend every waking moment trying to recall his name, his address ... his place of

employment. Anything that might help. And in the meantime, he would be Jake Bryan to everyone who knew him.

Everyone but Jamie.

Then, when the time finally came for him to go home, he would do so quietly without fanfare. And only then would Jamie tell Sierra that her father had died helping people in a fire. That Jesus had asked him to come home, after all.

The days that passed were painfully slow. The gentle man living in her home still carried with him dozens of Jake's attitudes and attributes. He still gave Sierra horsey rides and curled her hair before church on Sundays. The three of them shared a quiet Thanksgiving, but several times during the meal his eyes met hers, and the two of them knew.

It was only a matter of time.

On Jamie's worst days, when she and Sierra and the man living with them still felt like a family, when her heart simply couldn't be convinced that Jake wasn't alive and well and living among them, Jamie would have the most awful thought. She would wish that maybe—just maybe—the man would never find his way home and she and Sierra could keep him forever.

But that wasn't right, and it wasn't really what she wanted. She wanted Jake, and since she couldn't have him, she could hardly force a stranger to take his place. Even if the man's memory never returned. Always when those thoughts hit her, Jamie would find a quiet place and read Jake's Bible. She'd read over and over again the verses about the strength of God and the plans He had for His people. Plans to give her a hope and a future.

After an hour with the Lord, Jamie could usually think straight again, straight enough to know that the thing she really wanted was to love the stranger in the guest room enough to help him find his way home. And whatever pain would come after that, she had to believe that somehow God would see them through it.



Gradually, the flashbacks became more regular, the details within them more fine-tuned. He hated the way they confirmed the truth—that he wasn't Jake Bryan after all. He remembered looking at the helmet of the firefighter, seeing Sierra's picture and name taped inside. The river of people heading down the stairs, and the firefighters going up. When he thought they might help, that they might lend some type of healing to the pain Jamie was going through, he'd share the details of his flashbacks with her.

They spent nearly every evening at the computer working their way through news articles from September 11, and a photolisting of the thousands of people killed in the World Trade Center, searching for a face that might look like Jake's. The photos were organized in alphabetical order, and by Thursday they were making their way through the *Ts*. One in ten victims names had no photo attached—so there were no guarantees the exercise would turn up anything.

Still they had to try.

Jamie pointed to an image that was blurred. “Can you tell what color his hair is?”

“Too red.”

Jamie gave a hard sigh. “You're right.” She moved to the next image.

Suddenly, the flashback returned. Him walking down the stairwell and tripping, Jake helping him up, and then ... something else. He turned so his chair faced hers. “Jamie ...”

“Definitely not.” She was looking at the picture of a balding man ten years his senior. “Way too old.”

“Not the picture, Jamie ...” He waited for her to look at him. “I remembered something.”

She blinked, her hands frozen over the keyboard. “What?”

“Something Jake said.” Tension filled the space between them. “He told me Sierra was his little girl.”

Jamie's eyes widened. “You remember that?”

He nodded. "I do."

"What ...?" Tears filled her eyes, and her face grew a shade paler. "What else did he say?"

"Jamie ...?" This was the hard part. His memories were giving her a window to Jake's final minutes.

"Tell me." She swallowed hard. "I want to know."

There was a pause. "He said he'd better get moving. His buddies were going up without him."

She stared at him a moment longer, and her voice was the quietest whisper. "The building was already shaking, right? Isn't that what you said?"

He nodded. "Yes."

"Then why?" Her shoulders slumped, and she leaned toward him, letting her head rest on his shoulder. "Why didn't he get out of there?"

"Ah, Jamie ...?" He took gentle hold of her arms and kissed the top of her head. "Don't. You know he couldn't do that ...?" He kept his voice low and soothing. She wasn't crying, but she was obviously drained, and she leaned forward as his arms came around her. The familiarity between them had changed since they'd gotten the news about his identity.

But it definitely hadn't disappeared.

"Listen ...?" He wanted to say something before the moment passed. "I didn't know Jake when he was alive ... but I know him now, Jamie. I do. I know his thoughts, and believe me, he would never have gone back down those stairs."

She sat up, her movements slow and deliberate. Their eyes met and held, and he could see a hint of acceptance, one that hadn't been there before. She shrugged and managed a sad smile. "I know." For a second it looked like she might say something else, but then she shook her head and gave a soft huff. "I know."

The days wore on, and Jamie reminded herself every hour that the man living with them wasn't Jake. But some moments it was just about

impossible to convince herself.

Once they were at the breakfast table, and Sierra finished her cereal and came up behind him, wrapping her arms around his neck and kissing him on his cheek. “Let’s go to the library today, Daddy.” Her eyes danced with possibility. “We need more books.”

“More books? What about that bookcase upstairs?” He tapped his finger on the end of her nose and grinned at her. “Let’s get through those first.”

“Oh, Daddy. Please ...”

Then he tousled her hair and winked at her. “No’s a no, sweetheart.”

And Jamie closed her eyes and thought somehow there had to be a mistake. The words, the tone, the expression, as he talked to Sierra. All of it was Jake. It had to be ...

Another time she found him in the guest room sitting up in the bed, poring over Jake’s Bible. He was so lost in whatever he was reading that once again he didn’t hear her enter the room. Jamie had been crying that day and her eyes stung, but she refused to blink, refused to do anything but stare at the image the man made and pretend, just for a heartbeat, that Jake was alive.

She was still looking at him when he glanced up and smiled at her. “Have you read the book of James?” He pointed to the worn pages on his lap. “It’s amazing, Jamie. Come look.”

She hesitated, forcing herself to stay calm. Jake did that, didn’t he? Asked her to sit beside him while he read James or Ephesians or Romans. Whichever book he was studying that week.

And that was something else she did. When they weren’t working to find out his identity, or taking Sierra to the park or cleaning or cooking or shopping—she read Scripture. The pastor at church had given her a Bible, and she would take Jake’s journal or his scribbled margin notes and find verses he’d once loved. The exercise made her feel as close to him as anything she could do. Almost as though he were sitting beside her as she

worked.

In those times she was more at peace than at any other. Jamie understood why, of course. God was helping her, drawing her close and preparing her for the pain that lay ahead. Because it was coming, no question about it. But not now, not yet. Not as long as the man who looked like Jake still lived with her.

And her imagination was sometimes fierce.

All she had to do was look at him and watch him, talk to him and hug him for the questions to start coming. Could the blood test have been wrong? Were flashbacks sometimes seen in reverse, somehow? The more doubts that came, the more she would wish they'd never find the man's identity. As the days drifted by, there were times when she would've sworn in a court of law that the man living with her was no longer some businessman, a stranger with a blonde wife and a little boy waiting at home for him.

He was Jake Bryan once more, the one she'd fallen in love with back when she was twelve years old.

## **Een-en-dertig**

12 November 2001

Hulle sak saam op 'n bankie buite die hospitaal neer.

Jamie weet nie hoe hulle tot daar gekom het nie, net dat haar bene onder haar meeggee. Die realiteit van die bloeduitslae tref haar in vlae. Die man wat sedert die einde van September saam met haar in haar huis woon, is nie Jake Bryan nie, maar iemand anders, iemand wat bloot soos hy lyk.

Dit neem 'n oomblik langer voordat die tweede realiteit insink, maar teen die tyd dat hulle op die bankie gaan sit het, tref dit haar met geweld.

As die man langs haar nie haar man is nie, dan ...

Sy laat sak haar gesig in haar hande en begin so hewig ruk dat sy skaars kan regop bly. "Nee, Jake ... Nee! Here ... nie Jake nie." Haar woorde is deurdrenk van smart en die sagte, desperate klank van iemand in skok. Maar hierdie keer is die persoon nie iemand op televisie of iemand wat foto's teen 'n muur in New York plak nie. Dis nie een van die ander brandweermanne se vroue nie – dis sy.

Jamie Bryan.

Dit wat sy haar lewe lank gevrees het, het toe tog gebeur, en sy vind nou eers daarvan uit. Die man langs haar wat so baie soos haar man lyk, plaas sy hand op haar rug en fluister naby haar oor. “Ek’s jammer, Jamie ... ek’s so jammer.”

’n Deel van haar wil haar in sy arms werp, die papier uit sy ander hand neem, dit in duisend stukkies opskeur en in die naaste asblik gaan gooi – waar dit hoort. Maar iewers diep in haar bewussyn het die waarheid reeds wortelgeskiet en sy kan niks anders doen as om te kyk hoe dit groei nie.

Natuurlik is die persoon langs haar nie haar man nie. Hy het nie ’n brandweeruniform aangehad nie, nie eens sy veiligheidshelm nie. Waarom het dit nie vroeër vir haar so vergesog geklink nie? Selfs al het Jake sy uniform uitgetrek om vinniger te hardloop, sou hy ten minste sy helm gehou het. Daar het puin uit die lug gereën – liggame, staalbalke, gebreekte glas.

Aanvanklik – toe hulle nog in die hospitaal was – het kaptein Hisel gesê dat Jake sy helm waarskynlik tydens die ontploffing verloor het. Maar as dit die geval was, waarom het hulle dit nie gekry nie? Alles begin nou sin maak.

Jamie se snikke kom en sy huil totdat sy seker is sy gaan naard word. Natuurlik het hulle nie Jake se helm gekry nie. Dit was nog op sy kop, saam met hom iewers onder die puin begrawe. Tien teen een langs Larry se liggaam. Die ironie is tegelykertyd pynlik en mooi. Sy het daardie punt ook geïgnoreer. Die feit dat Jake by Larry sou wees. Hulle sou mekaar nooit gelos het nie, selfs al het dit beteken hulle albei moes een slagoffer na veiligheid neem voordat hulle weer by die res van hulle manne aangesluit het.

“Jake ... ” Die woord is ’n kreun wat diep uit haar binneste kom. “Waarom, Here ... waarom?”

Gedurende al die baie dae van twyfel oor die identiteit van die man saam met wie sy gebly het, het sy haarself nooit toegelaat om die moontlikheid tot hier te voer nie, nooit aan die feit gedink nie dat indien dié man nie regtig Jake was nie, Jake dood was. Sy sou hom nooit weer sien nie, hom nooit weer soen of vashou nie.

Het sy nie ook gesien wat kaptein Hisel gesien het nie? Die subtile verskil in sy gesigsvorm, in sy liggaamshouding? Was dit bloot wensdenkery om te dink wanneer die man in die gastekamer sy geheue herwin, sou hy weer in die Jake Bryan verander wat sy in graad ses liefgekyk het?

Jamie huil totdat sy nie kan asemhaal nie, treur oor die aantreklike man wat alles vir haar was – haar mentor en beskermmer, haar minnaar en vriend. Die ongelooflikste pa waarvan ’n klein dogtertjie kon droom.

By die gedagte aan Sierra begin sy opnuut huil. Wat gaan nou gebeur? En hoe gaan sy die nuus aan haar sorgvrye kind oordra? Die klein dogtertjie het nie vir ’n oomblik daaraan getwyfel dat die man wat van die hospitaal af saam met hulle huis toe gekom het, haar wonderlike pappa was nie.

Die hele situasie is meer gekompliseerd as waarvoor Jamie kans sien. En dan is daar nog iets. Wat gaan van die man langs haar word? Skielik tref dit haar dat hy sonder ’n heenkome en gesin is. Vir amper twee maande het hy hom

geskool om Jake Bryan te wees, en selfs al wys die bloedtoets dat hy iemand anders is, weet nie een van hulle wie daardie persoon is nie.

Na wat soos 'n leeftyd voel, is sy leeg gehuil en kom sy halforent in 'n sittende posisie. Dis onmoontlik om regop te sit; dit voel asof daar 'n berg op haar skouers rus. Ná 'n oomblik kyk sy op en soek na die oë van die man langs haar. Sy wange is nat, sy oë rooi, gevul met 'n warboel hartseer en verwarring, skuldgevoelens en smart.

“Ek’s jammer ... oor Jake.” Sy woorde is gestrem en sy stem bang.

Sy beweeg nader aan hom en hy hou haar vas, maar hierdie keer is hulle omhelsing anders as toe hulle vroeër in die motor was. Hierdie keer is dit die omhelsing van twee verlore mense in 'n chaotiese wêreld waarin hulle skielik die enigste twee mense is wat mekaar se pyn verstaan.

“Ons ... ” Sy snuif toe sy haar uit die omhelsing losmaak en neem sy hand. Daar is 'n natuurlikheid aan die aanraking, maar dis sonder sensualiteit, asof selfs haar sintuie finaal besef dat hy nie haar man is nie. “Ons weet nog steeds nie wie jy is nie.”

“Nee.”

“En iewers het jy waarskynlik 'n ... 'n blonde vrou en 'n klein seuntjie.”

Hy knik en sy oë raak opnuut vol tranen. “My herinneringe dui daarop, maar op die oomblik ... dit voel steeds of ek met jou getroud is.” Sy blik beweeg na 'n ry bome aan die oorkant van die straat en toe weer na haar. “Asof ek nog steeds Sierra se pa is.”

“Wat moet ons nou doen?” Jamie klink self soos 'n kind toe sy ondersoekend na die man kyk. “Waarnatoe sal jy gaan?”

Vir 'n lang ruk sê hy niks nie en kyk net na haar. Toe hou hy sy kop skeep en sy oë pleit by haar. “Kan ek by jou bly, Jamie? Totdat ek onthou?”

*Sy sukkel om deur haar tranen te sien en kyk boontoe. Sy gee 'n sagte kreet en skud haar kop. Here ... hoe kan U dit van my vra? Om my lewe met iemand te deel wat so baie soos Jake lyk dat my hart daarvan pyn?*

*'n Sinsnede uit Sondag se erediens flits deur haar gedagtes. Julle moet mekaar liefhê ... Soos Ek julle liefhet, moet julle mekaar ook liefhê.*

*Liefhê?*

Jamie maak haar oë toe; sy weet nie wat om met die gedagte te doen nie. Haar hart is stukkend en haar lewe onomkeerbaar verander. Hoe sal Christus se liefde haar die krag gee om vir 'n vreemdeling lief te wees? Een wat presies soos haar oorlede man lyk? En wat is die punt?

Toe ... asof God direk met haar praat ... kom die antwoord na haar toe. Jesus het haar met sy hele wese liefgehad. Hy het sy lewe neergelê sodat sy kan lewe. En nou is dit wat die Here wil hê sy vir hierdie man moet doen. Sy moet vir hom lief wees ... op 'n manier wat behels dat sy haar eie gevoelens moet neerlê, haar eie pyn opsy moet skuif. Sy moet haar bodemlose smart ignoreer en hierdie man help om sy pad huis toe te vind. Selfs al maak dit haar dood.

Alles sodat hy eendag weer kan lewe.

Sy maak haar oë oop en kyk weer na hom, bestudeer sy oë, die vrees en afwagting waarmee hy na haar kyk terwyl sy oor haar antwoord besluit. Toe neem sy albei sy hande in hare en haar mondhoeke lig baie effens. “Ja ... jy kan by my bly totdat jy onthou.” Sy trek haar asem in en ervaar ’n bonatuurlike teenwoordigheid wat haar regop hou en haar vir die pynlike pad vorentoe voorberei. “Ek weet jy’s nie Jake nie ... en ek weet ons tyd saam gaan kort wees.” Sy haal twee maal vinnig asem. “Jy’s nie my man nie en ... en jy’s nie Sierra se pa nie.” Sy bly stil en doen alles in haar vermoë om haarself te oortuig dat hierdie man nie regtig Jake is nie. “Ek vra net een ding van jou.”

“Oukei.” Die man se oë is vol trane, maar hy kyk nie weg nie. “Enigiets.”

“Asseblief ... terwyl jy by ons bly ... moenie vir Sierra sê nie.”

Dis asof die skok by die minuut al hoe harder deur Jamie se hart weergalm. Teen die einde van die eerste nag weet sy dat sy net danksy die Here se krag steeds asemhaal. Die verpleegster se woorde kom so te sê elke vyf minute by haar op.

*Jy’s een van die gelukkiges ... O-negatief ... die mees algemene bloedgroep.*

*Jy’s een van die gelukkiges ... gelukkiges ...*

Hoe is dit moontlik?

Jake is dood, en sy het nog nie oor sy dood getreur nie. Sy het nie eens geweet dat sy liggaam een van die duisende is wat in die ineenstorting van die torings vergruis is nie. Sou sy na Ground Zero toe gegaan het of by die stasie gewag het vir nuus? Sou sy waansinnig gewees het van vrees, desperaat om enigiets te hoor? Maar uiteindelik sou sy geweet het, en sou sy saam met die ander brandweermanne se vroue kon treur. Sy en Sue sou tydens die roudienste langs mekaar gesit het, mekaar regop gehou het wanneer staan onmoontlik geword het.

Maar Jamie het al hierdie dinge verbeur.

Die volgende dag kom sonder enige respek vir haar gevoelens en bring saam met hom die verskriklike realiteit van haar lewe. Die man onder in die gastekamer, die een wat soos haar man lyk en praat en ruik, die een wat selfs soos hy dink, is ’n volslae vreemdeling.

In ander huise in die stad word daar normaal gerou. Maar nie hier nie, nie nou nie. Daar is geen telefoonoproepe van vriende nie, nie die troos van ’n familie nie. Haar openbare rou sal moet wag totdat die man onder in die huis – wie hy ook al is – sy pad teruggevind het. Dan eers sal sy teenoor Jake se vriende, kaptein Hisel en Jake se pa kan erken dat die man vir wie hulle gebed het en langs wie se bed sy gewaak het, nie die man is wat hulle geken en liefgehad het nie.

Sy het haar lewe die afgelope twee maande met ’n ander vrou se man gedeel. In die tussentyd is Jake weg ... hy is weg. Vir altyd uit haar lewe. ’n Deel van haar wil aantrek en in haar motor klim en nou na Ground Zero toe ry. Dalk het hulle iets gekry – sy liggaam of sy veiligheidshelm. Sy trouing.

Die oggendson val deur die venster en sy beweeg oor na Jake se kant van die

bed. Sy kussingsloop ruik nie meer na hom nie, maar nietemin verberg sy haar gesig daarin. As sy geweet het hy kom nie huis toe nie, sou sy dit nooit gewas het nie. Sy kreun sy naam teen die kussing en begin snik.

*Ek's jammer, Jake ... Here, sê vir hom dat ek jammer is ... ek het nie geweet nie. Ek sou daar gewees het en self na hom gesoek het, op hom gewag het. Met al my wilskrag gewens het hy lewe. Ag, Here ... ek's jammer. Ek kan dit nie doen nie ...*

*Dogter, Ek is altyd by jou ... ook nou.*

Die gedagte is 'n sagte fluistering in die stil, donker plek waar haar hart gister nog geklop het. Dis Jake se woorde ... woorde wat sy in sy dagboek gesien het. Of dalk is dit God se woorde. Ja ... sy onthou. Jake het dit in sy Bybel onderstreep. God is by haar, en dit bring ten minste 'n mate van troos.

Maar dit maak nie die pyn minder nie.

Sy klou nog steeds aan Jake se kussing vas. Sy wil daar begrawe bly, maar sy moet asemhaal. Die kussing is klam van haar trane, en sy staar na hulle troufoto, die een op Jake se bedkassie. "Jake, hoekom ... " Alles in haar is seer, en haar woorde is gesmoord en dof. "Jy het vir my gesê die Here is nog nie klaar met jou nie ... dat niks ... niks met jou sou gebeur nie."

Daar is geluide onder in die huis en sy vee haar trane haastig af. Sierra! Sy is wakker en beweeg onder in die kombuis rond. Waarskynlik op pad om die man in die gastekamer te gaan wakker maak en hom te smeek om haar weer te laat perdjery. Die man wat sy dink haar pa is.

Dis tyd om haar trane af te vee en te begin voorgee.

"Pappa ... waar is jy? Opstaantyd." Haar dogtertjie se stem dra tot by haar, elke woord 'n pyl in Jamie se hart.

*Here ... help my ...*

Sy beweeg soos iemand wat oornag verouder het en klim swaar uit die bed. Die komberse kan haar nie teen die waarheid beskerm nie. Net toe sy wou dink dat die lewe weer gaan normaliseer, begin dit voor haar oë ontrafel. Maar die man wat soos Jake lyk, het haar nodig. 'n Halfuur later het sy gestort en aangetrek en genoeg grimering aangewend om haar geswelde oë te verbloem. Meer kan sy nie doen om haar vir hierdie dag gereed te maak nie. Sy het gedoen wat sy kan om haar eerste dag as 'n weduwee aan te pak. Haar eerste dag sonder Jake.

Daar is 'n paar sake wat uitgeklaar moet word, en Jamie wil so gou moontlik aan 'n plan werk.

Ná ete besluit hulle dat sy hom ter wille van Sierra steeds Jake sal noem. Verder moet hulle ook aan die ouens by die brandweerstasie en die mense by die kerk dink.

"Die koerante gaan 'n fees met hierdie storie hê as die waarheid nou uitkom," sê Jamie aan die ontbyttafel. "Dink net aan die opskrifte: 'Foutiewe identiteit laat man haweloos.' Ons kan dit nie toelaat nie."

"Wat is die oplossing?"



Daar is eintlik net een vanselfsprekende oplossing wat vir almal sal werk. Hulle sal eenvoudig moet toneel speel. Tot tyd en wyl hy genoeg besonderhede onthou om sy pad huis toe te vind, sal hulle moet maak asof hy Jake is. Hy sal al sy tyd en energie daaraan wy om sy naam, sy adres, sy werksplek te onthou. Enigiets wat kan help. En intussen sal hy vir almal wat hom ken, Jake Bryan wees.

Vir almal behalwe Jamie.

Wanneer dit uiteindelik vir hom tyd word om huis toe te gaan, sal hy dit sonder fanfare doen. Dan eers sal Jamie vir Sierra sê dat haar pappa dood is toe hy mense in 'n brand gehelp het. Dat Jesus hom uiteindelik tog gevra het om huis toe te kom.

Die dae gaan pynlik stadig verby. Die vriendelike man wat in haar huis bly, beskik steeds oor baie van Jake se gewoontes en eienskappe. Hy laat Sierra steeds perdjieri en Sondagoggende voor kerk draai hy steeds haar hare in. Hulle geniet 'n stil Thanksgiving, maar hulle oë ontmoet 'n paar keer tydens die maaltyd, en hulle albei weet.

Dis net 'n kwessie van tyd.

Op die swaarste dae, wanneer Jamie en Sierra en die man wat by hulle woon, steeds soos 'n gesin voel, wanneer sy eenvoudig nie kan aanvaar dat Jake dood is nie, kry Jamie die aakligste gedagtes. Sy wens dat die man dalk – net dalk – nooit weer sy pad huis toe sal vind nie en dat hy vir altyd by haar en Sierra kan bly.

Maar dis nie reg nie, en dis nie eens wat sy regtig wil hê nie. Sy wil vir Jake hê, en die feit dat sy hom nie kan hê nie, beteken nie sy kan iemand forseer om sy plek in te neem nie. Selfs al kom die man se geheue nooit terug nie. Telkens wanneer hierdie gedagtes haar teister, sonder Jamie haar af en lees uit Jake se Bybel. Sy gaan kyk oor en oor na die gedeeltes oor God se krag en dit wat Hy vir sy kinders beplan het. Planne om vir haar 'n verwagting en 'n toekoms te gee.

Na 'n uur in die Here se teenwoordigheid kan Jamie gewoonlik weer nugter dink, nugter genoeg om te weet dat sy die vreemdeling in die gastekamer eintlik wil help om sy pad terug na sy eie lewe te vind. En dat die Here hulle op die een of ander manier deur die pyn sal dra wat uiteindelik sal volg.

Die terugflitse word geleidelik meer en die besonderhede raak ook prominenter. Hy haat die feit dat dit die waarheid bevestig – dat hy uiteindelik tog nie Jake Bryan is nie. Hy onthou hoe hy na die brandweerman se helm gekyk het met Sierra se foto en naam wat binnekant vasgeplak was. Die stroom mense op pad ondertoe, die brandweermanne haastig om bo te kom. Wanneer hy dink die terugflitse sal help, dat dit Jamie se pyn op 'n manier sal kan verlig, deel hy die besonderhede met haar.

Hulle bestee amper elke aand voor die rekenaar en werk deur nuusberigte van 11 September en 'n lys foto's van die duisende mense wat in die World Trade Center omgekom het, op soek na 'n gesig wat soos Jake s'n lyk. Die foto's is alfabeties gerangskik en teen Donderdag trek hulle by die T's. Gemiddeld een

uit elke tien slagoffername het nie 'n foto nie – dus is daar nie 'n waarborg dat die oefening enigiets gaan oplewer nie.

Maar hulle moet ten minste probeer.

Jamie wys na 'n swak foto. “Kan jy sien watter kleur die hare is?”

“Te rooi.”

Jamie sug swaar. “Jy's reg.” Sy wend haar na die volgende foto.

Skielik kom daar nog 'n terugflits. Hy struikel oor die trappe, Jake help hom op en dan ... dan is daar iets anders. Hy draai sy stoel dwars na haar toe.

“Jamie ... ”

“Beslis nie.” Sy kyk na die foto van 'n man met ylwordende hare. “Heeltemal te oud.”

“Nie die foto nie, Jamie ... ” Hy wag totdat sy na hom kyk. “Ek het iets onthou.”

Haar hande verstil op die toetsbord. “Wat?”

“Dis iets wat Jake gesê het.” Daar is 'n gespanne stilte. “Hy het vir my gesê dat Sierra sy dogtertjie is.”

Jamie se oë word groot. “Onthou jy dit?”

Hy knik. “Ja.”

“Wat ... ” Haar oë is vol tranes en sy het verbleek. “Wat het hy nog gesê?”

“Jamie ... ” Dis die moeilike deel. Sy herinneringe bied haar 'n venster op Jake se laaste minute.

“Sê vir my.” Sy sluk swaar. “Ek moet weet.”

Daar is 'n stilte. “Hy het gesê hy beter gaan. Hy wou nie hê sy vriende moes sonder hom boontoe gaan nie.”

Sy staan nog 'n oomblik na hom en haar stem is 'n amper onhoorbare fluistering. “Die gebou was alreeds onstabiel, nè? Het jy nie laas so gesê nie?”

Hy knik. “Ja.”

“Hoekom dan?” Haar skouers val vooroor en sy leun oor na hom sodat haar kop op sy skouer rus. “Hoekom het hy nie uitgegaan nie?”

“Ag, Jamie ... ” Hy neem haar sag aan die arms en soen haar op haar kop.

“Moenie. Jy weet hy kon dit nie doen nie ... ” Hy hou sy stem sag en paaierend. Sy het nie meer tranes om te huil nie, maar sy is duidelik gedreineer en sy leun vorentoe toe hy sy arms om haar sit. Die gemeenskaplikheid tussen hulle het verander sedert hulle van sy identiteit uitgevind het.

“Luister ... ” Hy wil iets sê voordat die oomblik verby is. “Ek het Jake nie geken toe hy gelewe het nie ... maar ek ken hom nou, Jamie. Regtig. Ek weet hoe hy gedink het, en glo my, hy sou nooit ondertoe gegaan het nie.”

Sy sit regop, haar bewegings stadig en doelgerig. Hulle oë ontmoet en hy kan 'n sweempie aanvaarding by haar sien, iets wat nie voorheen daar was nie. Sy haal haar skouers op en glimlag hartseer. “Ek weet.” Vir 'n oomblik lyk dit asof sy nog iets wil sê, maar sy skud haar kop en laat haar asem uit. “Ek weet.”

Die dae sleep verby en Jamie moet haar amper uurliks daaraan herinner dat die man wat by haar bly, nie Jake is nie. Maar soms is dit amper onmoontlik

om haarself te oortuig.

Op 'n keer eet hulle saam ontbyt en nadat Sierra haar pap geëet het, slaan sy haar armpies van agter om sy nek en soen hom in sy nek. “Kom ons gaan vandag biblioteek toe, Pappa.” Haar oë dans afwagting. “Ons moet nog boeke kry.”

“Nog boeke? Wat van die boekrak bo in die gang?” Hy tik haar liggies op die neus en glimlag vir haar. “Kom ons maak hulle eers klaar.”

“Aa, Pappa. Seblief ... ”

Hy vryf haar hare deurmekaar en knipoog vir haar. “Nee is nee, my skat.”

Jamie maak haar oë toe en dink daar moet iewers 'n fout wees. Sy woorde, sy stemtoon, sy uitdrukking terwyl hy met Sierra praat. Alles daarvan is Jake. Dit moet wees ...

By 'n ander geleentheid kry sy hom in die gastekamer waar hy besig is om uit Jake se Bybel te lees. Hy is so verdiep in wat hy lees dat hy haar weer nie hoor inkom nie. Jamie het vroeër gehuil en die trane brand opnuut in haar oë, maar sy weier om daaraan toe te gee, weier om enigiets te doen buiten om na die man te kyk en net vir 'n oomblik te maak asof Jake nog lewe.

Sy staan nog steeds na hom en kyk toe hy haar raaksien en vir haar glimlag. “Het jy al Jakobus geles?” Hy wys na die verslete bladsye op sy skoot. “Dis ongelooflik, Jamie. Kom kyk.”

Sy huiwer en forseer haarself om kalm te bly. Dis nog iets wat Jake gedoen het. Hy sou haar vra om by hom te sit terwyl hy uit Jakobus of Efesiërs of Romeine geles het. Met watter boek hy ook al daardie week besig was.

Nou is dit iets wat sy ook doen. Wanneer hulle nie sy identiteit probeer uitvind of Sierra parkie toe neem of besig is om skoon te maak of te kook of inkopies te doen nie, lees sy Bybel. Die predikant het vir haar 'n Bybel gegee, en soms gaan kyk sy na Jake se dagboek of lees sy kantaantekeninge en gunstelingverse. Die oefening laat haar nader aan hom voel as enigiets anders wat sy doen. Amper asof hy by haar is terwyl sy daarmee besig is.

Dis dan wanneer sy die grootste vrede ervaar. Dis eintlik vanselfsprekend. Die Here is besig om haar nader aan Hom te trek en voor te berei vir die pyn wat voorlê. Want dit kom, daaraan twyfel sy nie. Dis egter nog nie hier nie. Nie solank die man wat soos Jake lyk, steeds by haar woon nie.

En haar verbeelding is soms meedoënloos.

Sy hoef maar net na hom te kyk, hom dop te hou, met hom te praat of 'n drukkies te gee, dan kom die vrae. Kon die bloedtoets verkeerd gewees het? Gebeur dit soms dat terugflitse agteruit en verkeerdheid gesien word? Hoe meer haar twyfel word, hoe meer wens sy hulle vind nooit die man se identiteit uit nie. Met verloop van tyd is daar dae dat sy in die hof met 'n eed sou sweer dat die man in haar huis nie meer 'n sakeman, 'n vreemdeling met 'n blonde vrou en klein seuntjie is wat by die huis op hom wag nie.

Hy is weer Jake Bryan, die man op wie sy verlief geraak het toe sy twaalf was.

# Chapter THIRTY-TWO

DECEMBER 4, 2001

By the end of the second week, Jake had no doubt that he'd been a businessman working in the south tower when the building collapsed. Somehow halfway down the stairwell he'd met up with a man who must've been Jake Bryan.

There, he must've fallen and been helped up by him, and in the process Jake must've lost his helmet. That's when Jake would've seen Sierra's picture and her name. The rest of the way down, he would've known that the firefighter who'd looked so much like him wasn't going to get out of the building alive. And that the little girl, Sierra, wasn't going to have a daddy after that awful morning.

The moment must've been so powerful that it was the only one not erased from his long-term memory when the south tower collapsed and shot him beneath the fire truck.

That much of the story—as wild and crazy as it was—finally made sense both to him and to Jamie. But other details were slow in coming. The blonde woman had appeared in many flashbacks since that first one two weeks earlier. She was his wife; he had no doubt about that.

Some of the scenes he remembered now were so vivid they made him cry. Times when he and his pretty wife had first met, and the two of them would sit outside some small outbuilding, her singing while he played the guitar. The love he felt for her in those moments was overwhelmingly real. But it clashed strongly with memories that felt more recent, memories of him rushing out the door to spend another weekend at the office—wherever he worked.

He had enough pieces of the puzzle now to know that he'd been nothing like Jake Bryan.

Though his memories told him he'd loved the blonde woman at first, though he'd celebrated the birth of the son they apparently shared, he had

let everything about their love grow cold. All so that he could get ahead in whatever business he'd been involved in.

And something else hit him. Somehow he remembered having a daughter, but never actually holding her. Nothing about her face or voice flashed in his mind, but her presence was real all the same. He wondered if he was only thinking of Sierra, wishing her to be his, or whether there really had been a little girl in his life, maybe a child he and his wife had lost.

He hoped that someday the memory of her would make sense.

In his quiet moments, when Jamie was playing outside with Sierra and he was able to spend time remembering, he found it sadly ironic that a job might've become more important than his family. A job he couldn't even remember now.

And then there was the matter of his faith. He was fairly sure he'd been a believer before the terrorist attacks, but his faith must've grown cold in recent years. All of that had changed, of course. God had allowed him to become the husband and father he'd never really been, by living in the shoes of a man who no longer was.

The idea was almost more than he could grasp.

Many nights since he'd taken the blood test, Jamie would sit up with him after Sierra was in bed and go over a list of the companies that had once been located in the south tower of the World Trade Center. They were both fairly positive that he'd worked in that building, because that was the one Jake would've been in. And his brief meeting with Jake was something they both agreed must've happened.

They'd go down the list of names one at a time. Seabury & Smith.... Harris Beach & Wilcox ... Frenkel & Company ... Morgan Stanley. Jamie would say the name of the company out loud and then show it to him. He'd ponder it for a moment, repeating it over and over again. When no memory was stirred, they'd go down the list until finally he couldn't take another moment of it. By now they'd been through the various companies two

times, and still nothing sounded familiar.

Eventually, he would remember who he was, but how would he ever let go of them? Sierra had claimed a piece of his heart he'd never regain. And what about Jamie? Up until the blood test, he'd been sure he was falling in love with her. But his memories made it clear that somewhere out there—probably only a dozen miles away—a woman was grieving his loss, believing him dead. A woman and a boy he had treated badly for who knew how many years.

A woman and a boy he wanted a second chance with, the second chance he'd prayed for in the moments before the building collapsed.

It was Monday night, and Jamie had just finished giving Sierra a bath. “Daddy ... come kiss me good night.” Her little voice sang out through the old house and tugged at Jake's heart.

“Okay, baby. I'll be right there.”

He stood up and headed toward the stairs. They were familiar to him now, and he took them two at a time. The truth was, he had two families. One he knew, but didn't belong to. And one he belonged to, but didn't know. The entire situation was too strange to fathom completely. He reached the last step. *God ... make it all work out somehow. Please ...*

He walked through the door and met Jamie's stare in the shadows of Sierra's pink bedroom. Their eyes held for a moment, and then he let his gaze fall to Sierra. She held her arms out. “Daddy ...”

“Good night, princess.” He moved to the edge of her bed and ran his fingers through the wispy blonde curls that surrounded her forehead. “Let's pray.”

This was their routine, the one they'd established since Jake had come home from the hospital. It was nothing new to Sierra, because Jake Bryan had been the kind of man who made a point of being home when his daughter went to bed each night. The kind of man who prayed with her and played with her, giggled with her and gave her horsey rides on demand.

And now, because of Jake—because of all that the man had written in

his journal and in his Bible—he had become that kind of man too.

Jamie put her hand on his shoulder as the three of them closed their eyes and bowed their heads. “Dear Jesus.” Sierra's voice soothed the anxious places in his heart. “Thank You for a good day, and thank You for my mommy and daddy.” She paused and added the line she'd added ever since finding out about Larry. “Please tell Katy's daddy in heaven hi for us, and when Katy's sad because she misses him, give her a little hug, Jesus. Amen.”

Jake felt the gentle squeeze of Jamie's hand on his shoulder. “Lord, thank You for giving us strength each day, and for the joy to know that Your mercies are new every morning. Please protect us as we sleep. Amen.”

It was his turn. He cleared his throat and began. “Lord, You are faithful and true, and Mommy is right. Your mercies are new every morning. Help us hang on to that all the days of our lives, no matter what tomorrow might bring.” He paused. “And help Sierra know how very much we love her.”

He bent to kiss Sierra, usually a simple kiss on her cheek. But this time she framed his face with her little-girl hands and searched his eyes. “Butterfly kisses, Daddy. Okay?”

Jake knew the routine by now, and he rubbed his nose against hers three times. Next without hesitating, he turned his face just enough so that they could brush their eyelashes against each other's cheeks. When they were done, a smile lit up her face. “You're the best daddy in the whole world.”

As Jake and Jamie held hands and left the room, he thought of the blonde woman and the lonely little boy. The one he hadn't seen nearly enough in the past few years. And that moment he uttered a silent prayer, one that he'd been praying more often lately.

That one day, the words Sierra had just said would be true.

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The breakthrough happened an hour later.

Jamie was upstairs brushing her teeth when a commercial came on television. It showed a man walking across the floor of an office building, and then stopping to look at the camera. “Koppel and Grant took a big hit on September 11. We lost two employees and our entire New York City office.” The man leaned against a nearby desk. “While we grieve with all of Manhattan over the losses wrought upon us by the terrorist attacks, we are here today to say that we survived. This month we will open a new office in Manhattan.” The man gazed out a window at the altered skyline of the city. “Koppel and Grant wants the evil people who sought to destroy us to know one thing very clearly. We're still here. And with the help of people here in New York and all across America, we'll be here for many years to come.”

The image faded, and an insignia flashed on the screen while the man's voice repeated. “Koppel and Grant. In Los Angeles and now ... again ... in New York City. An investment name you could trust then. An investment name you can trust now.”

Jake stood up, his knees trembling. “Jamie!” He hissed her name, careful not to wake Sierra.

He could hear her padded feet running from her room and down the stairs. In the time it took her to reach his side, he was certain beyond any shadow of a doubt.

“I remember something.”

For a single moment, he saw grief and regret mingle in the depth of Jamie's heart, and he understood. They'd talked about it before; how there were times when they wished he would never remember. But just as quickly, the sorrow passed and Jamie swallowed.

“What ... tell me?”

He pointed at the television. “I used to work for Koppel and Grant.”

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Jamie made the call the next morning.



They'd decided to start with the new office in Manhattan. After all, Jake must've worked in New York, since he was in the building when the terrorist attacks took place. It took Jamie only a few seconds to locate the phone number for the new Koppel and Grant headquarters, and then for a long moment she and the kind man across from her merely stared at each other.

They both knew the score.

If the phone calls Jamie was about to make led them to the man's actual identity ... to his family ... then their days together would be over. Maybe as soon as the following day. Once more Jamie entertained the wild idea of tossing out the number and begging this man who looked and acted so much like Jake to stay with her and Sierra. But he belonged to someone else, and again the moment passed. Instead, Jamie took his hands in hers, bowed her head and prayed, begging God that this detail about Koppel and Grant might be the answer they'd been looking for.

"We pray that even in the next few minutes You would help—" Jamie had been about to say Jake's name, but she caught herself. "Help my friend find his family."

Through teary eyes, Jamie leveled a sad smile at the man. "Okay, then ..." She drew a deep breath and picked up the receiver. "This is it."

Sierra was across the street once more, so they had privacy to take as long as they needed to make phone calls. She punched in the numbers, and over the next ten minutes, she was passed from a secretary to a division manager to the department head and finally to the director of personnel.

Each time Jamie explained the situation, how she was trying to help a victim from September 11 find his family, and how the man now thought he'd once worked for Koppel and Grant. But always the person on the other end would fall silent for a moment, and then explain how he or she was new or how they didn't handle those types of matters. Then Jamie would be connected to someone else, someone who might *really* be able to help her. By the time the director of personnel answered the line, Jamie's patience

and anxiety were both at the breaking point. Next to her, the stranger she'd come to love sat barely breathing, his eyes locked on hers.

“Can I help you?”

The woman on the other end sounded pleasant, but Jamie had to close her eyes for three seconds before she felt calm enough to speak. “Yes ... I have a friend here with me who was hurt in the World Trade Center on September 11. He ... he's had amnesia.” Jamie met the man's eyes and felt the familiar bond they'd built in the days since the attacks. She looked away so she could concentrate. “The thing is, this man now thinks that maybe he once worked for Koppel and Grant. What I need to have is a list of the people from your company who were killed when the south tower collapsed.”

“Well,” the woman hesitated. “It's a short list. Koppel and Grant lost just two employees.”

That's the information the commercial had provided the night before, but Jamie wanted to make sure. Her heartbeat quickened. If there really were only two names on the dead or missing list, then it should be easy to figure out whether the man sitting across from her was one of them. Jamie rested her forehead in her hand and closed her eyes. *Give me strength, God ... help me desire what You desire.* “Can ... can you give me their names, maybe tell me a little bit about them.”

“Ummm.” The woman considered the request, and for a few painful seconds silence filled the line. Then the woman lowered her voice some. “Oh, why not. The guys are dead, anyway.” She drew a slow breath. “Everyone knew them—they were the top people in the company.”

Jamie shot a look at the man beside her. The top men in the company? The man who'd shared her home these past months acted nothing like a business mogul. He smiled and covered her free hand with his. Jamie blinked at the thought. An executive? It wasn't possible. She focused on the matter at hand. “What were their names?”

“One was R. Allen Koppel, and the other was Eric Michaels.”

Jamie held her breath. “That's all?” She forced herself to exhale. “Can you tell me something else about them?”

“Sure.” The woman took her time. “Allen was a nice man in his fifties, married a few times with no kids. He never loved anyone like he loved Koppel and Grant.” The woman hesitated. “Eric ... he was a young guy. Good-looking. Stationed at the LA office. He was here on business that Tuesday morning.”

Jamie felt her heart sink to the floor. *Eric Michaels?* Was that who she was sitting next to? The man who had shared her home, her life, her very soul, these past few months? She squeezed her eyes shut. “What ... what did he look like?”

“I told you ...” A phone was ringing in the background, and the woman was losing interest. “The guy was nice-looking. Tall, maybe six-two, dark trim-cut hair. Sort of an athletic build.”

Jamie had heard enough. The woman might as well have been staring at the man across from her as she described him. She was going on, repeating the details about the Los Angeles office, and Jamie tried to listen.

“Eric worked too hard. He never spent a minute at home from what I understand. In fact,” her tone filled with regret, “it was the job that killed him. Both of them, really.”

“What do you mean?”

“When the plane hit the south tower, everyone else in the office left down the stairwell. They were on the sixty-fourth floor, so they had just enough time to get out.” She paused. “But not Allen and Eric. The last anyone saw of them, they were crunching numbers, trying to finish one last transaction before heading down.”

“So everyone at Koppel and Grant's pretty sure both men are dead?” Again Jamie hated herself for hoping.

“That's the thought. Of course anything's possible.” The woman clucked her tongue. “After all, there's still a thousand people unaccounted for. They never found either of their bodies.”

Jamie thanked the woman and hung up. Then she looked at the man across from her, and in the depths of her being, she knew their time together was almost up. Her tone was soft, kind, as though she knew the answer to her question before she asked it. “If I say the name Eric, what comes to mind?”

He blinked, and a dawning came over his expression, a knowing that was undeniable. His mouth opened, and what he said made her feel like both weeping and shouting for joy all at the same time.

“When I hear the name Eric, I can think of only one thing.” He swallowed and tightened his grip on her hand. “The name Michaels. Eric Michaels.” He searched her eyes. “Is that ... is that me?”

The tears came regardless of her desire to stop them. “Yes ...” She uttered a happy cry and hugged him, held him as she would only get to do a handful of times again in her life. “Your name is Eric Michaels.”

## **Twee-en-dertig**

4 Desember 2001

Teen die einde van die tweede week twyfel Jake nie meer daaraan dat hy ’n sakeman was wat in die suidelike toring gewerk het toe die gebou ineengestort het nie. Iewers op pad ondertoe het hy ’n man teëgekom wat Jake Bryan moes wees.

Daar moes hy geval het en toe Jake hom ophelp, het hy sy helm verloor. Dis toe dat hy Sierra se foto en haar naam gesien het. Die res van die pad ondertoe sou hy geweet het dat die brandweerman wat sy ewebeeld was, nie lewend uit die gebou sou kom nie. En dat die dogtertjie, Sierra, ná daardie verskriklike oggend nie meer ’n pappa sou hê nie.

Dit moes so ’n indruk op hom gemaak het dat dit die enigste oomblik is wat nie uit sy langtermyngeheue gewis is toe die suidelike toring inmekaargestort het en hy onder die brandweerwa beland het nie.

Hierdie deel van die verhaal – hoe vreemd en vergesog dit ook al klink – begin uiteindelik vir hom en Jamie sin maak. Maar die ander besonderhede bly hom ontwyk. Sedert hy die blonde vrou twee weke gelede die eerste keer gesien het, is sy in baie terugflitse. Sy is sy vrou; daar bestaan geen twyfel by hom nie.

Sommige van die tonele wat nou terugkom, staan hom so duidelik voor oë dat hy trane kry. Tye toe hulle jonk getroud was en hulle buite ’n klein geboutjie

gesit het; sy het gesing en hy het kitaar gespeel. Die liefde wat hy in daardie oomblikke vir haar voel, is amper oorweldigend. Maar dit strook nie met herinneringe wat meer onlangs blyk te wees nie. Die kere toe hy haastig by die deur uit is om nog 'n naweek by die kantoor deur te bring.

Hy het nou genoeg van die legkaartstukke om te weet hy was glad nie soos Jake Bryan nie.

Al dui die herinneringe daarop dat hy die blonde vrou aanvanklik liefgehad het, alhoewel hulle die geboorte van hulle seun gevier het, het sy liefde koud geword. Alles sodat hy die boonste sport van die suksesleer kon bereik.

Nog iets tref hom. Op die een of ander manier onthou hy hy het 'n dogtertjie gehad, maar dat hy haar nooit regtig vasgehou het nie. Hy kan nie haar gesig of stem onthou nie, maar haar teenwoordigheid blyk 'n realiteit te wees. Hy wonder of hy net aan Sierra dink en bloot wens dat sy syne was, en of daar regtig 'n klein dogtertjie in sy lewe was, dalk 'n kind wat hy en sy vrou verloor het.

Hy hoop dat die herinnering aan haar eendag sal sin maak.

In stil oomblikke wanneer Jamie en Sierra buite speel en hy tyd het om in sy verlede rond te graawe, vind hy dit tragies ironies dat sy beroep belangriker as sy gesin geword het. 'n Beroep wat hy nou nie eens kan onthou nie.

En dan is daar die kwessie van sy geloof. Hy is taamlik seker dat hy voor die terroriste-aanvalle 'n gelowige was, maar ook sy geloof het deur die jare begin verwelk. Die afgelope maande het egter herstel gebring. Die Here het hom toegelaat om die man en pa te word wat hy nooit was nie deur in die skoene van 'n man te staan wat dit nie meer is nie.

Die besef oorweldig hom.

Sedert hulle die bloettoets laat doen het, sit Jamie baie aande by hom en gaan hulle saam deur die name van maatskappye wat kantore in die suidelike toring van die World Trade Center gehad het. Hulle is albei taamlik seker dat hy in daardie gebou gewerk het, want dis die een waarin Jake en sy makkers sou wees. En sy vlugtige ontmoeting met Jake is iets wat beslis moes gebeur het.

Dan werk hulle stelselmatig deur die lys name. Seabury & Smith ... Harris Beach & Wilcox ... Frenkel & Company ... Morgan Stanley. Jamie sê die naam van die maatskappy hardop en wys dit dan vir hom. Nadat hy vir 'n oomblik daarvoor nagedink het, sê hy dit weer vir homself. Wanneer daar geen herinnering by hom opkom nie, werk hulle verder deur die name totdat dit vir Jake te veel raak. Teen hierdie tyd is hulle al twee maal deur die verskillende maatskappye, sonder enige sukses.

Uiteindelik sal hy onthou wie hy is, maar hoe gaan hy dit regkry om hulle te laat gaan? Sierra het 'n kleim in sy hart afgepen wat hy nooit weer sal terugkry nie. En wat van Jamie? Tot en met die bloettoets was hy daarvan oortuig dat hy besig was om haar lief te kry. Maar sy herinneringe maak dit duidelik dat daar iewers – waarskynlik net 'n klompie kilometer daarvandaan – 'n vrou is wat glo dat hy dood is en oor hom rou. 'n Vrou en 'n seuntjie wat hy etlike jare lank stief behandel het.

'n Vrou en 'n kind saam met wie hy 'n tweede kans wil hê, die tweede kans waarvoor hy oomblikke voor die gebou se ineenstorting gebid het.

Dis Maandagaand en Jamie het Sierra sopas klaar gebad. "Pappa ... kom gee vir my 'n nagsoentjie." Haar stemmetjie dra deur die ou huis en pluk aan Jake se hart.

"Ek kom, my liefie. Ek's nou daar."

Hy staan op en loop na die trap toe. Hy ken die trappe al en draf hulle twee-twee uit. Die feit is, hy het twee gesinne. Een wat hy ken, maar waaraan hy nie behoort nie. En een waaraan hy behoort, maar nie ken nie. Die hele situasie is ver bo sy begrip. Hy bereik die boonste trappie. *Here ... laat alles op 'n manier uitwerk. Asseblief...*

Hy gaan by Sierra se pienk kamer in en ontmoet Jamie se oë. Hulle bly vir 'n oomblik na mekaar kyk, en dan beweeg sy blik na Sierra. Sy steek haar armpies uit. "Pappa ..."

"Lekker slaap, prinsessie." Hy loop tot by haar bed en streel oor die blonde krulle wat haar gesiggie omraam. "Kom ons bid."

Hulle het hierdie roetine gevestig toe Jake uit die hospitaal gekom het. Dit was nie iets nuuts vir Sierra nie, want Jake Bryan was die soort man wat 'n punt daarvan gemaak het om by die huis te wees wanneer sy dogtertjie saans bed toe gaan. Die soort man wat saam met haar gebid en gespeel het, saam met haar gelag het en haar op sy rug laat perdjier het.

En nou, danksy Jake – danksy alles wat die man in sy dagboek en Bybel geskryf het – het hy ook so 'n soort man geword.

Jamie plaas haar hand op sy skouer toe hulle drie hul oë toemaak en hul koppe laat sak. "Liewe Jesus." Sierra se stem stil die ang in sy hart. "Dankie vir 'n lekker dag, en dankie vir my mamma en pappa." Sy bly stil en herhaal die versoek wat sy sedert hulle van Larry gehoor het, elke aand bid. "Sê asseblief vir Katy se pappa in die hemel ons stuur liefde en gee vir Katy 'n drukkie wanneer sy hartseer is omdat sy na hom verlang, Jesus. Amen."

Jamie gee Jake se skouer 'n sagte drukkie. "Here, dankie dat U ons elke dag krag gee, en dat ons kan weet dat u genade elke oggend nuut is. Beskerm ons asseblief in hierdie nag. Amen."

Dit is sy beurt. Hy maak keel skoon en begin. "Here, U is getrou en betroubaar, en Mamma is reg. U genade is elke môre nuut. Help ons om vir altyd daaraan vas te hou, maak nie saak wat môre oplewer nie." Hy bly stil. "En help vir Sierra om te weet hoe baie lief ons vir haar is."

Hy buk om Sierra soos gewoonlik somer op die wang te soen. Maar hierdie keer plaas sy haar handjies aan weerskante van sy gesig en kyk in sy oë. "Vlindersoentjies, Pappa. Oukei?"

Teen hierdie tyd ken Jake die oefening, en hy vryf sy neus drie keer teen hare. Sonder aarseling draai hy sy gesig net effens sodat hulle hul wimpers teen mekaar se wange kan fladder. Toe hulle klaar is, verhelder 'n glimlag haar gesiggie. "Pappa is die beste pappa in die hele wêreld."

Terwyl Jake en Jamie hand aan hand uit die kamer loop, dink hy aan die

blonde vrou en die eensame klein seuntjie. Die een wat hy die afgelope paar jaar nie naastenby genoeg gesien het nie. En in daardie oomblik bid hy die gebed wat hy die afgelope tyd meer dikwels begin bid het.

Dat Sierra se woorde eendag sal waar wees.

'n Uur later vind die deurbraak plaas.

Jamie is in haar badkamer besig om tande te borsel toe 'n advertensie op televisie verskyn. 'n Man loop deur 'n kantoor, gaan staan en kyk in die kamera. "Koppel & Grant is 11 September swaar getref. Ons het twee werknemers en ons kantoor in New York verloor." In 'n volgende skoot leun die man teen 'n lessenaarblad. "Ons treur saam met die hele Manhattan oor die verliese wat deur die terroriste-aanvalle veroorsaak is, maar ons is vandag hier om te sê dat ons oorleef het. Hierdie maand open ons 'n nuwe kantoor in Manhattan." Die man tuur deur 'n venster na die nuwe stadsilhoeët. "Koppel & Grant wil hê die terroriste wat daarop uit was om ons te vernietig, moet een ding baie duidelik weet. Ons is nog hier. En met die ondersteuning van die inwoners van New York en oor die hele Amerika sal ons nog baie jare hier wees."

Die beeld word uitgedoof en Koppel & Grant se embleem verskyn op die skerm terwyl die man herhaal. "Koppel & Grant. In Los Angeles en nou ook in New York. 'n Naam waarop jy gister kon vertrou en vandag steeds kan staatmaak."

Jake se bene voel onvas toe hy opstaan. "Jamie!" Hy roep haar in 'n fluisterstem sodat Sierra nie moet wakker word nie.

Hy hoor hoe sy bo uit haar kamer hardloop en haastig met die trappies afkom. Toe sy hom bereik, bestaan daar by hom geen twyfel nie.

"Ek onthou."

Vir 'n oomblik sien hy iets soos smart en spyt in haar oë, en hy verstaan. Hulle het al voorheen daaroor gepraat; dat daar tye is wanneer hulle albei wens hy onthou nooit nie. Maar sy onderdruk die hartseer en sluk.

"Wat ... sê vir my?"

Hy wys na die televisie. "Ek het vir Koppel & Grant gewerk."

Jamie bel die volgende oggend.

Hulle het besluit om by die kantoor in Manhattan te begin. Jake moes immers in New York gewerk het as hy in die gebou was toe die terroriste aangeval het. Dit neem Jamie net 'n paar sekondes om die nuwe Koppel & Grant-hoofkantoor se telefoonnommer op te spoor. Dan kyk sy en die man wat sy liefgekry het, vir 'n paar lang oomblikke na mekaar.

Hulle albei weet hoe sake staan.

As Jamie se telefoonoproepe hulle na die man se ware identiteit en sy gesin lei, is hulle dae saam op 'n einde. Dalk die volgende dag al. Vir 'n vlietende oomblik wil Jamie die nommer weggooi en hierdie man wat so baie soos Jake lyk en optree, smee om by haar en Sierra te bly. Maar hy behoort aan iemand anders, en die oomblik is gou verby. Jamie neem sy hande in hare, laat sak haar kop en bid. Sy smee God dat haar gesprek met Koppel & Grant die

antwoorde sal verskaf waarna hulle op soek is.

“Here, help ... ” Jamie is op die punt om Jake se naam te sê, maar bedink haar. “Help my vriend om sy gesin op te spoor.”

Sy glimlag tranerig vir die man. “Nou goed ... ” Sy trek haar asem diep in en tel die gehoorstuk op.

Sierra speel weer by die maatjies oorkant die straat; dus het hulle privaatheid om op hulle tyd die nodige telefoonoproepe te maak. Sy skakel die nommer en binne die volgende tien minute word sy deur ’n sekretaresse na ’n afdelingshoof deurgeskakel wat haar op sy beurt na die departementshoof en uiteindelik die personeelhoof deursit.

Elke keer verduidelik Jamie die situasie – dat sy ’n slagoffer van 11 September probeer help om sy gesin op te spoor, en dat die man nou vermoed hy het vroeër vir Koppel & Grant gewerk. Maar ná ’n kort stiltetjie verduidelik die persoon aan die ander kant telkens dat hy of sy nuut is of nie weet hoe om sulke sake te hanteer nie. Dan word Jamie na iemand anders deurgeskakel, iemand wat haar dalk beter kan help. Teen die tyd dat die personeelhoof haar telefoon optel, is Jamie se geduld en senuwees albei op breekpunt. Langs haar sit die vreemdeling wat sy liefgekry het, amper sonder om asem te haal, sy oë stip in hare.

“Kan ek help?”

Die vrou klink vriendelik, maar Jamie moet haar oë vir ’n paar oomblikke toemaak voordat sy kalm genoeg is om te praat. “Ja ... ek het ’n vriend wat in die World Trade Center beseer is. Hy ... hy ly aan geheueverlies.” Jamie ontmoet die man se oë en voel die bekende band wat sedert die aanvalle tussen hulle ontwikkel het. Sy kyk weg sodat sy kan konsentreer. “Die ding is, die man vermoed nou dat hy dalk op ’n tydstip vir Koppel & Grant gewerk het. Wat ek nodig het, is ’n lys name van die personeel wat in die terroriste-aanval dood is.”

“Wel,” die vrou aarsel. “Dis ’n kort lys. Koppel & Grant het net twee werknemers verloor.”

Dis die inligting wat die vorige aand oor die televisie verskaf is, maar Jamie wil seker maak. Haar hartklop versnel. As daar regtig net twee name op die lys vermistes of oorledenes is, behoort dit maklik te wees om vas te stel of die man by haar een van hulle was. *Gee my krag, Here ... help my om te begeer wat U begeer.* “Kan ... kan u hulle name vir my gee, my dalk iets van hulle vertel.”

“Ummm.” Die vrou wik en weeg, en vir ’n paar sekondes is dit pynlik stil. Toe vervolg die vrou in ’n sagter stem. “Ag, hoekom nie. Hulle is buitendien dood.” Sy trek haar asem stadig in. “Almal het hulle geken – hulle was die topouens in die maatskappy.”

Jamie gee ’n kyk na die man langs haar. Die topouens in die maatskappy? Die man wat die afgelope maande in haar huis gebly het, tree allermins soos ’n sakemagnaat op. Hy glimlag en plaas sy hand oor hare. Jamie knip haar oë by die gedagte. ’n Direkteur? Dis onmoontlik. Sy bepaal haar aandag by die



gesprek. “Wat was hulle name?”

“Die een was R. Allen Koppel en die ander Eric Michaels.”

Jamie hou haar asem op. “Is dit al?” Sy dwing haarself om uit te asem. “Kan u my nog iets van hulle vertel?”

“Kom ek dink.” Die vrou neem haar tyd. “Allen was ’n vriendelike man in sy vyftigerjare. Hy was ’n paar maal getroud sonder kinders. Hy was vir niemand so lief soos vir Koppel & Grant nie.” Die vrou aarsel. “Eric ... hy was ’n jongman. Aantreklik. Hy het in ons Los Angeles-kantoor gewerk en was daardie oggend hier op ’n sakebesoek.”

Jamie voel hoe haar moed in haar skoene sak. *Eric Michaels?* Is dit langs wie sy sit? Die man wat haar huis, haar lewe, haar siel hierdie afgelope paar maande vol gemaak het? Sy knyp haar oë toe. “Hoe ... hoe het hy gelyk?”

“Ek sê mos ... ” ’n Telefoon lui op die agtergrond en die vrou is besig om belangstelling te verloor. “Die man was aantreklik. Lank, dalk een komma nege, donker hare. Taamlik atleties gebou.”

Jamie het genoeg gehoor. Die vrou kon netsowel na die man oorkant haar gekyk het. Sy is steeds besig om te praat en besonderhede oor die Los Angeles-tak te herhaal en Jamie probeer luister.

“Eric het te hard gewerk. Uit wat ek kan aflei, was hy omtrent nooit by die huis nie. Trouens,” vervolg sy spytig, “dit was die werk wat hom doodgemaak het. Hulle albei, eintlik.”

“Wat bedoel jy?”

“Nadat die vliegtuig die suidelike toring getref het, het die res van die personeel ontruim. Hulle was op die vier-en-sestigste vloer en het net genoeg tyd gehad om uit te kom.” Sy bly stil. “Maar nie Allen en Eric nie. Toe hulle die laaste keer gesien is, was hulle besig om nog ’n transaksie af te handel voordat hulle sou ondertoe gaan.”

“Met ander woorde almal by Koppel & Grant is taamlik seker dat albei mans dood is.” Jamie verwens haarself opnuut dat sy nog hoop.

“Ons aanvaar so. Enigiets is natuurlik moontlik.” Die vrou klik haar tong. “Hulle liggame is nooit opgespoor nie.”

Jamie bedank die vrou en lui af. Sy kyk na die man oorkant haar, en diep in haar binneste weet sy dat hulle tyd saam amper verby is. Haar stem is sag en vol deernis, asof sy reeds die antwoord op haar vraag ken. “Wat kom by jou op as ek die naam Eric sê?”

Hy knip sy oë, en daar kom ’n lig in sy oë, ’n onbetwisbare wete. Sy mond gaan oop en wat hy sê, wil haar tegelykertyd laat huil en jubel van vreugde.

“As ek die naam Eric hoor, kom daar net een ding by my op.” Hy sluk en sy hand verstyf om hare. “Die van Michaels. Eric Michaels.” Hy kyk vraend na haar. “Is dit ... is dit ek?”

Haar trane kom ongeag haar voorneme om nie te huil nie. “Ja ... ” Sy gee ’n klein gilletjie toe sy hom omhels en styf, styf vashou soos sy nog net enkele kere in haar lewe sal doen. “Jou naam is Eric Michaels.”

# Chapter THIRTY-THREE

DECEMBER 4, 2001

It was December, and the shock had finally begun to wear off.

Laura had come to terms with the fact that the problems in her marriage were both Eric's fault and hers. There was no one to shake a fist at, no point hanging on to either guilt or anger. She had never realized how badly hurt he'd been by the loss of their daughter. After that, they had simply let their love die, and Eric had replaced her with his position at Koppel and Grant.

A position that had demanded everything from him. His time, his devotion, his heart and soul. Eventually his life.

She and Josh were getting on with living. The hotel where Eric had been staying had finally shipped his suitcase back to Laura. His belongings held nothing of interest, no postcards or souvenirs. A month later they'd accepted an urn of Ground Zero ashes from officials in New York City as a way of remembering Eric, but they'd turned down an invitation to attend a memorial service in Manhattan. The two of them didn't need a memorial service to remember Eric.

They needed a miracle.

Because in a practical sense, adjusting to life without Eric had been relatively simple. Once Laura got over her anger and self-recrimination, once she stopped running the list of what-ifs and should-have-dones and might-have-beens through her head and came to grips with the reality of the situation, there really wasn't much else to mourn.

Eric had disappeared from their lives long before he left for New York City.

And in his place—or maybe as a way of feeling loved again—Laura had taken to spending much of her free time with Clay. It was Tuesday morning, and Laura, Clay, and Josh had shared a pleasant dinner the night before. Now Josh was outside playing football with his friends, and Clay

was on his way over. The three of them were going to do some early Christmas shopping at the Thousand Oaks Mall.

The doorbell rang, and Laura ran her fingers through her hair. Every day she enjoyed Clay's presence a little more, but she wasn't sure what God thought of their relationship. Not much, she guessed. The fence that stood between friendship and love for the two of them was chain link and razor wire. Neither of them had any intention of crossing it.

Not yet, anyway.

Still, Laura had to admit that over the past few weeks, she'd found herself attracted to Clay more than once, feeling the hint of interest she'd felt for him back in her junior year of high school.

Laura let the thought pass, and for a fleeting moment, she was angry at Eric again. This confusion, the wayward thoughts of her heart, they were all his fault. If only he'd told her years ago that he'd named their daughter and grieved her still. If only he'd opened his heart to her, maybe he would've never gotten so involved at work.

Maybe he would've been home that terrible September morning.

The thought passed as she opened the door. Clay stood there, a bouquet of roses in his hand. "Here." He handed them to her. "For dinner yesterday." A grin climbed his face.

Laura took the flowers and tilted her head. Clay had always been like this, hadn't he? Caring for her, placing her on a pedestal despite the fact that her heart belonged to Eric. Something in his crooked smile made her go to him willingly. She held the flowers in one hand and hugged him with the other. When she pulled away, his arm stayed around her waist.

"You know something?"

"What?" Laura lowered her chin and smiled at him. She kept her voice playful and upbeat so the moment wouldn't become something she wasn't ready for.

"I love to see you smile."

"Thanks." A dying piece of her heart gasped for breath and began

beating again. "It feels good."

Before either of them could move away, he brought his face to hers and gave her a tentative kiss on the lips. It was over almost as soon as it began, but it left them looking at each other, frightened and curious and lost in each other's eyes all at the same time. In some ways, being here in Clay's arms was as natural as the California sun. They'd known each other forever, after all, and they'd always cared about each other.

But not like this.

Laura was about to say something when the phone rang. She blinked, took a few steps backwards, and held up the flowers. "I'll ... I'll put these in water."

With light steps and a heart that felt freer than it had in years, Laura returned to the kitchen and picked up the phone. "Hello?" She walked to a cupboard near the sink and pulled out a dusty flower vase.

"Laura ... this is Murphy." The man paused. "Are you sitting down?"

The blood began to drain from Laura's face, and she uttered a forced laugh. Only one thought planted itself in her mind. They must've found Eric's body. "Murphy ... what're you talking about."

"I'm serious, Laura. Get a chair."

Murphy had always been gruff and to the point, short on words and shorter still on personality. Not once in all the years Laura had known him had he ever tried to be funny. She set the flowers down on the counter, made her way into the living room, and sat on the nearest sofa.

From the corner of her eye, she saw Clay make his way inside and take a seat near her. She shot him a look and whispered the word, "Murphy." She sucked in a jagged breath. "What's going on, Murph? You sound funny."

Murphy muttered something. Then he inhaled sharply. "Laura ... I got a call today. A lady from New York City." He did a short huff. "You aren't going to believe this. I know it because I still don't believe it myself."

Laura's throat was thick, and her heart had slipped into an

unrecognizable rhythm. “Just say it, Murphy. What was the call about?”

“The woman told me she has Eric. He's alive, Laura. He got amnesia when the building collapsed, but he's alive. He's been living in Staten Island.”

Laura would've dropped the phone, except her hands were suddenly frozen. “What!” She stood up and walked a few hurried steps in one direction, then the other, then back. “Murphy, don't do this to me if you're not serious. You're telling me Eric's alive?”

She looked at Clay and saw a series of emotions pass across his face. Shock, disbelief, and confusion. Followed quickly by the proper look of hope and anticipation. He was at her side in an instant, and he slipped his arm around her shoulders as she learned the details of what had happened.

“I guess Eric looked just like this other lady's husband. A firefighter from New York City.” Murphy hesitated. “They found out yesterday it wasn't her husband, after all. It was Eric.”

Laura couldn't begin to identify her emotions. Eric was alive? How was it possible, and were they sure it was him? She squeezed her eyes shut. “What if it's not him?”

“His memory's coming back, Laura. He remembers who he is now.”

So, it was true! Eric was alive, and the reality of that fought to make its way into her consciousness. Ever since September 11, Laura had found most comfort by reliving the good times, the days back when they were first married, before they'd lost their baby daughter. Sarah. But now, in light of the fact that he was living, more recent memories barged their way in. So he was alive? Did that mean he'd come home ready to take on life at Koppel and Grant again? Would he even want to come home? And what place did he have there after being gone so long? There were details that suddenly needed figuring out, and Laura didn't know what to begin to feel.

She barely listened as Murphy rattled on about his conversation with the New York woman. Only one thing was absolutely sure in her mind. She was grateful she had never let herself fall in love with Clay Michaels.

She cared about him, yes, but she would never love him. Not the way she knew he loved her. Because her entire heart and soul were still given to the only man who had ever laid ownership to them.

Yes, their marriage was a mess, and they had issues they needed to talk about. Maybe it would be months or years before things would be right again. But he definitely had a place in her life. Of course. He was alive again—and that could only mean that she'd been given the second chance she'd prayed about. A chance to love a man who wasn't dead, after all, and who—whatever he'd been through—might come home soon. A man who one day might be willing to break down and mourn the loss of their baby daughter, a man who in time might even choose to make changes in their marriage that could give her the family she'd always dreamed about.

A man named Eric Michaels.

## **Drie-en-dertig**

4 Desember 2001

Dis Desember en die werklikheid het uiteindelik begin insink.

Laura het vrede gemaak met die feit dat sy en Eric albei vir die probleme in haar huwelik verantwoordelik was. Daar is niemand vir wie sy haar vuiste kan bal nie en dis sinneloos om skuldgevoelens of woede te koester. Sy het nooit besef hoe diep Eric deur die dood van hulle dogtertjie getref is nie. Daarna het hulle hul liefde eenvoudig laat doodgaan, en Eric het haar met sy pos by Koppel & Grant vervang.

'n Pos wat alles van hom vereis het. Sy tyd, sy toewyding, sy hart en siel. En uiteindelik ook sy lewe.

Sy en Josh begin stadigaan weer lewe. Die hotel waar Eric tuis was, het uiteindelik sy tas teruggestuur. Sy besittings het niks van besondere belang, iets soos 'n poskaart of aandenking ingesluit nie. 'n Maand later het hulle 'n urn met Ground Zero-as van die New Yorkse stadsowerheid ontvang as 'n manier om Eric te huldig, maar hulle het die uitnodiging na 'n gedenkdiens in Manhattan van die hand gewys. Hulle het nie 'n diens nodig om Eric te onthou nie.

Wat hulle nodig het, is 'n wonderwerk.

Want in werklikheid was dit taamlik eenvoudig om by 'n lewe sonder Eric aan te pas. Nadat Laura deur haar woede en selfverwyt gewerk het, nadat sy die lyse sê-nous en moes-gedoen-hets en kon-gewees-hets uit haar kop

verban het en haar by die realiteit van haar situasie berus het, was daar nie veel anders om te betreur nie.

Eric het lank voor sy besoek aan New York uit hulle lewe verdwyn.

In sy plek – of dalk as ’n manier om weer geliefd te voel – het Laura baie van haar vrye tyd saam met Clay begin deurbring. Dis Dinsdagoggend en Clay het die vorige aand by Laura en Josh kom eet. Josh speel buitekant met ’n paar maats, en Clay is op pad hierheen. Sy en die twee manne het besluit om vroeë Kersinkopies by die Thousand Oaks Mall te gaan doen.

Die voordeurklokkie lui en Laura trek haar vingers deur haar hare. Sy is daagliks besig om Clay se geselskap meer te geniet, maar sy is nie seker wat die Here van hulle verhouding dink nie. Nie veel nie, raai sy. Die grens tussen vriendskap en romantiese liefde is in hulle geval van doringdraad gemaak. Nie een van hulle is van voorneme om oor te klim nie.

Nie op hierdie tydstip nie, in elk geval.

Nietemin moet Laura erken dat sy die afgelope weke by meer as een geleentheid tot Clay aangetrokke gevoel het, dat sy soms die sweempie belangstelling ervaar wat sy op hoërskool gehad het.

Laura skuif die gedagte opsy en vir ’n vlietende oomblik is sy weer kwaad vir Eric. Haar verwarring en wederstrewige gedagtes is alles sy skuld. As hy haar maar net vertel het dat hy vir hulle dogtertjie ’n naam gegee het en steeds oor haar getreur het. As hy maar net sy hart teenoor haar oopgemaak het, sou sy werk hom dalk nooit so ingesluk het nie.

Wie weet, dalk sou hy daardie verskriklike Septemberoggend by die huis gewees het.

Die gedagte vervaag toe sy die deur oopmaak. Dis Clay en hy het ’n bos rose gebring. “Hierso.” Hy gee dit vir haar. “Vir gisteraand se ete.” Hy glimlag.

Laura neem die blomme en hou haar kop skeef. Clay was nog altyd so. Ondanks die feit dat haar hart aan Eric behoort, het hy nog altyd vir haar omgee en haar op ’n voetstuk geplaas. Iets aan sy glimlag maak dat sy outomaties na hom toe gaan. Met die blomme in haar een hand gee sy hom ’n vinnige drukkie. Toe sy hom laat gaan, bly sy arm om haar middel.

“Weet jy wat?”

“Wat?” Laura laat sak haar ken en kyk na hom. Sy hou haar stem speels en opgeruimd sodat die oomblik nie iets word waarvoor sy nie gereed is nie.

“Ek is mal daaroor wanneer jy glimlag.”

“Dankie.” Dis asof haar hart asemskip en weer begin klop. “Dit voel goed.”

Terwyl hulle nog so staan, laat sak hy sy kop en soen haar aarselend op die mond. Dit duur net ’n oomblik, maar ná die tyd kyk hulle verdwaas na mekaar, tegelykertyd bang en nuuskierig en halfverlore. In sommige opsigte voel dit natuurlik, amper reg, om so in Clay se arms te staan. Hulle ken mekaar immers al van skool af, en hulle het nog altyd vir mekaar omgee.

Maar nie op hierdie manier nie.

Laura wil net iets sê toe die telefoon lui. Sy knip haar oë, gee ’n paar treë terug en hou die blomme op. “Ek ... ek gaan dit gou in water sit.”

Laura loop ligvoets en met 'n hart wat jare laas so vry gevoel het, kombuis toe en tel die telefoon op. "Hallo?" Sy buk by 'n kas naby die wasbak en haal 'n stowwerige blompot uit.

"Laura ... dis Murphy." Die man bly stil. "Sit jy?"

Laura voel hoe die bloed uit haar gesig loop en sy gee 'n geforseerde laggie. Daar kom net een gedagte by haar op. Hulle het Eric se liggaam opgespoor.

"Murphy ... wat bedoel jy?"

"Ek's ernstig, Laura. Kry 'n stoel."

Murphy was nog altyd bars en op die man af, 'n man van min woorde en nog minder takt. In al die jare wat Laura hom ken, het hy nog nooit probeer snaaks wees of grappies maak nie. Sy sit die blomme op die toonbank neer, loop na die woonkamer toe en gaan sit op die rusbank.

Uit die hoek van haar oog sien sy Clay inkom en naby haar kom sit. Sy kyk na hom en fluister die woord "Murphy". Sy voel bewerig toe sy haar asem intrek.

"Wat is aan die gang, Murph? Jy klink snaaks."

Murphy mompel iets. Toe trek hy sy asem in. "Laura ... ek het vandag 'n oproep gekry. 'n Vrou van New York." Hy blaas sy asem uit. "Jy gaan dit nie glo nie. Ek weet dit, want ek glo dit ook nog nie."

Laura se keel is droog en haar hart begin onreëlmatig klop. "Spel dit uit, Murphy. Waaroor het die oproep gegaan?"

"Die vrou het vir my gesê Eric is by haar. Hy lewe, Laura. Hy het geheueverlies opgedoen toe die gebou inmekaargestort het, maar hy lewe. Hy is in Staten Island."

Laura sou die telefoon laat val het as dit nie was dat haar hande skielik versteen het nie. "Wat!" Sy staan op en begin vinnig heen en weer loop.

"Murphy, moet dit nie aan my doen as jy nie ernstig is nie. Wil jy my sê Eric is nie dood nie?"

Sy kyk na Clay en merk die kaleidoskoop van emosies wat op sy gesig afspeel. Skok, ongeloof en verwarring. Vinnig gevolg deur 'n meer gepaste hoopvolheid en afwagting. Hy staan dadelik op en kom sit sy arm om haar skouers terwyl Murphy haar vertel wat gebeur.

"Ek lei af dat Eric net soos die vrou se man gelyk het. 'n Brandweerman van New York." Murphy aarsel. "Hulle het gister uitgevind hy was toe nooit haar man nie. Hy's Eric."

Dis vir Laura onmoontlik om haar emosies te identifiseer. Eric lewe. Hoe is dit moontlik en hoe seker is hulle dis hy? Sy knyp haar oë toe. "Sê nou dis nie hy nie?"

"Sy geheue is besig om terug te kom, Laura. Hy onthou nou wie hy is."

Dan is dit waar! Eric lewe, maar dis asof die werklikheid moeite het om tot haar bewussyn deur te dring. Sedert 11 September het Laura haarself vertrous deur die goeie tye te herleef, die dae toe hulle jonk getroud was, voordat hulle hul babadogtertjie verloor het. Maar nou dat sy hoor hy is nie dood nie, begin die meer onlangse herinneringe hulle aan haar opdring. Dus lewe hy ... Beteken dit hy kom huis toe om sy lewe by Koppel & Grant te hervat? Wil hy



ooit huis toe kom? En waar gaan hy inpas nadat hy so lank weg was? Daar is 'n magdom besonderhede wat uitgeklaar moet word, en Laura weet nie wat om te begin voel nie.

Sy luister skaars terwyl Murphy op sy gesprek met die New Yorkse vrou voortborduur. Daar is net een stukkie dankbaarheid in haar hart, en dis die feit dat sy haarself nooit toegelaat het om op Clay Michaels verlief te raak nie. Ja, sy gee om vir hom, maar sy sal hom nooit liefhê nie. Nie soos hy haar liefhet nie, want haar hart en siel behoort steeds aan die enigste man wat dit ooit besit het.

Ja, hulle huwelik is in die moeilikheid en daar is probleme waaroor hulle moet praat. Dalk sal dit maande of jare wees voordat alles weer gaan regkom. Maar hy het definitief 'n plek in haar hart. Natuurlik. Hy lewe weer – en dit kan net beteken dat sy die tweede kans gegun is waarvoor sy gebid het. 'n Kans om 'n man lief te hê wat toe nooit dood was nie en wat – ongeag wat hy deurgemaak het – binnekort sal huis toe kom. 'n Man wat dalk eendag bereid sal wees om te huil en oor die dood van hulle dogtertjie te treur, 'n man wat mettertyd dalk selfs sal kies om veranderinge in hulle huwelik aan te bring sodat sy die gesin kan hê waarvan sy altyd gedroom het.

'n Man met die naam Eric Michaels.

# Chapter THIRTY-FOUR

DECEMBER 4, 2001

The arrangements came together quickly.

Now that Eric's wife knew the truth, Jamie had no choice but to make the call. A call that would send the man who looked like Jake home where he belonged, one that would leave Jamie's heart as empty as her house.

Eric had asked her to do the talking, because after being gone so long, after changing so much, he didn't want to speak to his wife until they were face-to-face.

Jamie understood.

And so she called the woman, and as simply as possible, she filled in the details about what had happened to her husband. "He ... he could've been my husband's twin." Jamie sat next to Eric, holding his hand as she explained the situation to Laura Michaels. "It wasn't until he started getting flashbacks that we realized he might not be the man I married."

The woman listened, and the few times she had questions, her voice was filled with empathy. Only once did the woman ask about the friendship Eric had obviously developed with Jamie. "Is ... does my husband love you?"

A lump formed in Jamie's throat, and she squeezed Eric's hand. "We've become very good friends." She sniffed, forcing herself to stay composed. She glanced at Eric and held his eyes. "But he's married to you, Mrs. Michaels. He wants to come home as quickly as possible."

An hour later Laura called back with flight plans. She would fly into La Guardia the following morning just before noon and escort Eric home. And for Jamie, that would be the end of it, the end of believing for two months that her husband was alive. The end of hoping that a few memories were all that stood between her and the life she'd once shared with Jake.

When Jamie hung up the phone, she hugged Eric and whispered near his ear. "Pray for Sierra ... it's going to be so hard on her."

“Oh, Jamie, honey, I’m sorry ... I never meant for any of this to happen.” He stroked her back as a single sob worked its way through her chest. “If only my memory would’ve come back sooner, maybe none of this —”

She drew back and placed a finger on his lips. “No, Eric ... God wanted you here.” She sniffed and smiled at him through her tears. “As hard as this is for all of us ... you being in my life these past months was part of His plan.” A happy cry came from her, and she wiped her cheeks. “Think about it. Without you I wouldn’t have learned to believe in God. And you ...” She brushed away another series of tears. “You would still be some business executive who didn’t know how to love.” She shook her head and held his face gently in her hands. “And now ... as long as you live, you’ll take a little bit of Jake Bryan with you.”

“But how ...” Eric’s voice was barely more than a whisper, and tears choked every word. “How I am ever going to say good-bye?”

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The two of them spent their last night together with Sierra.

They shared Hawaiian pizza, and Eric dutifully collected his pineapple pieces and gave them to Sierra, who had declared herself a pineapple princess some weeks ago. After dinner, Eric and Jamie took turns reading to her, and finally they cozied up on the sofa on either side of her and watched *Little Mermaid*. At the end when the mermaid decides to return to land and has to bid her father good-bye, Eric could do nothing about the steady stream of tears on his cheeks. He didn’t dare look at Jamie; he already knew she was crying.

Their nighttime ritual was no different than usual, except that this time Eric kissed Sierra good-night and walked out of her room for the last time. After he shut her door and took two steps, he turned and fell into Jamie’s arms. “She deserves a daddy, Jamie.” He let out a quiet, desperate sound. “It kills me to think she won’t have one after tomorrow.”

Jamie cried too, but she had a strength that surprised him. Clearly

she'd been praying about this good-bye, asking God to prepare her heart and see her through it. Eric only hoped God would do the same for him. A piece of him couldn't wait to be back with Laura, to show her how he'd changed and beg her forgiveness about how he'd treated her in the past. He was remembering more with each passing hour, and he knew that he'd all but abandoned both his wife and his young son.

He prayed they'd forgive him.

But though he looked forward to being with them, he was torn apart at the thought of leaving Jamie and Sierra. That night as he and Jamie parted at the foot of the stairs and said good-night, Eric was tempted beyond reason to follow her. Just this one time. To lie beside her and hold her, love her and cry with her and wish that somehow they could keep the sun from rising in the morning.

The thought left as soon as it had come, and he merely hugged her once more and kissed her on the cheek. He was asleep almost as soon as his head hit the pillow, and he spent the entire night dreaming of Laura and Josh. What if they didn't want him back? Maybe the damage he'd done wasn't something he could fix? Questions and strange bits of imagined conversations played in his mind all night.

In what felt like five minutes, he woke to the sounds of Jamie and Sierra in the kitchen. She had told him he could wear one of Jake's outfits home. Other than that, he had nothing to pack. Everything he'd thought was his really belonged to Jake.

Eric showered and shaved—surprised at how the scars on his face had faded. He still had to be careful with the new skin, but it appeared that the doctor had been right. Eventually, it would be almost impossible to tell what Eric had been through.

Except in the private places of his heart.

He made his way to the kitchen, and Sierra ran to him, the way she had done every day since he came home from the hospital. Jamie smiled at him from her place near the stove, and he gave her a quick wink before

turning his attention to Sierra.

“Daddy! Guess what?”

Eric had to swallow hard to keep from crying. “What?”

“Mommy's making blueberry pancakes! Isn't that great? It's my bestest kind of all!”

He swept her into his arms and nuzzled his face against hers. *God ... watch over this child ... and one day give her the father she needs. Please, God.* “You're sure pretty today, princess.”

“Yeah, but my hair's too straight, and Mommy says I get to play with Katy.” She pulled back, her chin lowered in a way that tugged hard at Eric's heart. “Can you curl it, Daddy, even though it isn't Sunday?”

Eric blinked back the beginnings of tears. “Of course, honey. I'd love to.” He slid Sierra back to the floor and watched her scamper to her spot at the table. Then he went up alongside Jamie and leaned his head close to hers. “I don't know if I can do this.”

She sniffed and raised her eyes up for a minute. “I've been up since four ... talking to God.” The pancakes sizzled and she flipped them. Then she looked at him and smiled. Her eyes were dry, but he could see she'd been crying. “You can do it, Eric. We both can. And one day everything will all be okay again. God promised me.”

They took their places at the table, and Sierra chattered happily about being in kindergarten the following fall and Christmas coming up and the fact that pineapple was her favorite fruit. Next to blueberries.

When the meal was over, Eric cast a glance at Jamie. “Want help with the dishes?”

“No, thanks.” She shook her head, her eyes glistening. “I think you have some hair to curl.”

Eric followed Sierra up to Jamie's bedroom and plugged in the curling iron. It was a routine he'd learned weeks ago, and one that had given Sierra and him many special times to talk. Sierra bopped about along the bathroom counter, looking at Jamie's makeup and perfume bottles,

completely unaware of the way her life was about to change.

The curling iron was ready, and Eric clicked it a few times. His signal that Sierra needed to come to him and stand still while he worked. She did, turning her back to him and letting her long blonde hair cascade down her little back. Eric opened the iron and pinched it around one section of Sierra's hair. Then he rolled it halfway up her back.

“So ... you're going to Katy's today, huh?”

“Yep.” Sierra held her chin high, careful not to move. “Katy's never seen my hair with curlies in it.”

One by one Eric worked his way around her head until gorgeous curls surrounded her like a halo. Eric unplugged the iron and set it back on the counter where it could cool.

At that moment, they heard Jamie calling to her. “Sierra ... I have to run you over to Katy's house. Come on ... it's time.”

Sierra wriggled her nose at Eric. “Thanks, Daddy. No one does curlies like you.”

Eric caught the child's chin between his thumb and forefinger and looked straight into her eyes. “You know something?”

“What?” Her little-girl eyes danced, the way they always did whenever she was with him.

“I think Mommy would do an even better job at curlies.” Eric lowered his voice and glanced at the door. “Actually, she's the best curler in the whole world. She just doesn't want everyone to know.”

Sierra's eyes grew wide. “Really?”

“Really.” Eric could feel his heart breaking. “So this Sunday before church ... I think Mommy should get a chance to curl your hair.” He forced a smile. “Okay?”

“Okay! Can I tell her?”

Eric gave a quick shake of his head. “Not yet. Not until Sunday, all right?”

“All right.” Sierra took his hand then and led him toward the door.

“We gotta go now. Katy's waiting.”

Jamie was in the foyer, watching them as they walked hand in hand down the stairs. She spoke to Sierra but kept her eyes completely on Eric. “It's time to go. Say good-bye to Daddy, and we'll head over to Katy's, okay?” She took a few steps back, her eyes still locked on Eric's. He understood. She was giving him this time, this space to say one last good-bye.

Eric worked the muscles in his jaw and sat back on his heels. He met Sierra's eyes for what would be the last time and whispered, “Come here, baby.”

She wrapped her arms around his neck. “Bye, Daddy. Have a good day.”

A sob lodged itself in Eric's throat, and for a full minute he couldn't say anything. Instead, he simply held her, stroking her back and begging God to be the father she wouldn't have after that morning. When he could finally speak, he pulled away some and smiled at her. “I love you, Sierra. You know that, right?”

She giggled. “Silly, Daddy. A'course I know that. You love me better than pumpkin pie.”

“That's right, honey. Much better than that.” Eric could barely breathe for the pain in his soul. He raised his eyebrows. “Butterfly kisses?”

She clapped her hands and gave a quick nod of her pretty head. Then their noses met and brushed against each other three times. Next his eyelashes brushed against her cheek, and hers brushed against his. When they were finished, he took hold of her shoulders. “Bye, Sierra.” And in that instant he remembered something from Jake's journal, something he had always told Sierra whenever he'd left for a shift at the fire station. “Be good, honey. And don't forget to pray to Jesus.”

“Okay.” She kissed him one more time and then spun around and skipped over to Jamie. With one final wave over her shoulder, she grabbed hold of Jamie's hand, and the two of them disappeared around the corner.

Eric pulled himself up and sat on the third stair, his head in his hands. He listened as Sierra and Jamie made their way into the garage, Sierra chattering and giggling about the day she'd be spending with Katy. He heard the garage door open and the car back out and slowly drive away.

Only then did the tears come, tears he'd been holding back since he'd learned his real name. He cried for Sierra who would find out that afternoon that her daddy had died in a fire, and for Jamie who would have to raise her by herself. But he also cried for himself, and for the piece of his heart that had just driven off with one very special four-year-old little girl.

A girl he would never give butterfly kisses to again.

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Jamie had known for the past few days that the pain wouldn't really come until she told Eric good-bye. She'd been honest about her time with God, and the promise He'd made her that morning. She'd been lost in prayer and Scripture, reading Jake's highlighted verses, when very clearly she'd heard a whisper in the center of her soul.

*I will neither leave you nor forsake you, My daughter ... I know the plans I have for you ... plans to give you a hope and a future, and not to harm you.*

All her life Jamie had stayed away from pat answers, from preachy people who seemed to have a Bible verse for every situation in life. But the words she'd heard that morning from God were nothing short of divine. They breathed life into her at a time when she surely would've suffocated from the heartache otherwise.

After she dropped Sierra off at Sue's house, Jamie and Eric drove together to La Guardia. She knew it might be awkward, but she wanted to see Laura, wanted to watch Eric and her together so she could have closure on this time in her life. Two minutes into the drive, Eric reached for her hand and wove his fingers between hers.

"You've been wonderful, Jamie." He studied her, his eyes still red from the tears he must've cried after saying good-bye to Sierra.



“Thanks.” She smiled and shifted her gaze back to the road ahead of her.

The morning traffic was light, so the drive took less time than usual. They found a spot in the parking garage and made their way to the security checkpoint, where the airport had created a waiting area for guests, who since September 11 could no longer go all the way to the gate without a boarding pass.

Jamie looked at her watch and led Eric to a quiet place near a wall of windows at the back of the waiting area. Laura Michaels' United Airlines flight was supposed to land in three minutes.

They faced each other, leaning against the windows with less than a foot separating them. Jamie reached into her bag and pulled out a wrapped package. The ache in her heart had spread to her arms, and the gift felt like it was made of lead. “Here.” She handed it to Eric. “It's an early Christmas present.”

Eric took the bag and for a long time he looked at her, lost in her eyes. Jamie wanted to cry, but she couldn't. Not yet. She nodded to the package in Eric's hands, and finally he glanced down. He peeled back the paper and tossed it in a nearby trash can. Inside the package was a bound set of pages. Blue letters across the top page read only this: “In case you ever forget ...”

He opened the cover page, and Jamie heard his breath catch in his throat. She had copied dozens of pages from Jake's journal—key entries about the importance of fatherhood and the joys of being married to his best friend. At the back were another twenty or so pages, copies from Jake's Bible, complete with the shaded highlighting and scribbled notes in the margin.

His eyes met hers again, and he needed no words. He clutched the bound document to his chest and pulled her close. “Jamie ... I'll never forget you. Not you or Jake.”

She lifted her head, desperate to keep from breaking down in this, their final moment. “You're so much like him, Eric.” Her smile was

genuine, growing from someplace that, despite her sorrow, could understand the value all their time together had wrought. “One day in heaven the two of you will have to have a long talk.”

A rush of people began to make their way past the security gate, and Eric turned. Jamie watched him, wondering if he could see his wife yet. Then he pointed, his voice thick. “There she is. Near the back.”

He faced Jamie once more and their eyes held. This was it ... in a few minutes he'd be gone from her life forever. “I love you, Jamie. I'm a different man because of you. Because of Jake.”

She listened, still stunned by how easily he could've *been* Jake. She could feel the tears building within her, but she only nodded at him. “Go, Eric.” Jamie cast a glance toward the blonde woman, getting closer to the waiting area. “She's looking for you.”

Eric nodded. “Do you want to meet her?”

“No.” Jamie struggled to find her voice. “I'll leave quietly. Besides ... the two of you have a plane to catch.”

“Okay.” He worked the muscles in his jaw, his eyes still searching hers. “Kiss Sierra for me, will you?”

Jamie gave a quick nod, and the moment faded. Eric hugged her once more, a long hug, the last they would ever share. Then, without saying another word, he turned to leave. Jamie watched him work his way through the crowd of waiting people, until finally his wife spotted him. The blonde woman hurried her pace, her mouth open in a kind of unbelieving shock. The two of them came together, and Eric swung her in his arms.

Jamie felt something pierce her heart, and the tears came then.

She blinked so she could see clearly, and she watched the woman kiss him square on the mouth. For a moment they spoke to each other, their faces inches apart, lost in the moment despite the milling passengers making their way around them.

Then the woman linked her arm through his, and without looking back, Eric led her toward the security line where they would pass through

before boarding their plane.

“Good-bye, Eric ... take care of her.” Jamie whispered the words and then slowly, her soul aching, she turned her back on the man she'd thought was her husband, the man who—because of Jake—had taught her to love God, and live without fear. The man who—because of Jake—had learned how to love again.

She passed a hundred people and saw none of them. Every step took her farther from the delusion that somehow she could keep Jake alive, that by living with Eric she still somehow had a piece of Jake.

Six minutes later she walked out of the airport and into her new life—the one where she would only have Jake's words to remind her of a man whose love would stay in her heart a lifetime. A love that no terrorist attack could ever take away. One that had continued to live within her, growing her and changing her. And not just her, but Eric Michaels, as well. A love that would live on long after the rubble from September 11 was cleared and hauled away.

A love so great it lived even now.

Jamie drove with the window open, and the breeze mingled with her tears and stung at her cheeks. She allowed herself to grieve the loss of not just Jake, but Eric and the tangible presence of her husband's love—even as it had played out in the life of a stranger.

She had to find Sierra now, had to tell her that her daddy was dead. The words she was about to say would be the most difficult in all her life, words she knew would've killed her if not for the time she'd spent with God that day, those past months, hanging on to Him for dear life. Her strength came from Him alone, from the truth she'd gained by reading Jake's Bible.

A truth she could hear Jake whispering in her heart even now.

She pulled up in front of the Hennings house, parked the car, and forced herself up the sidewalk. In the end it had been the right decision, keeping the truth from Sue and everyone else. Accepting it had been hard

enough for her and Eric. And telling anyone would've opened up potential situations neither of them wanted to deal with. Not that Sue would've called the newspapers. But word would've gotten out, and then what? That wasn't what they'd wanted. And by keeping the news to themselves, they'd been able to focus on what was important—helping Eric find his way home.

Jamie ordered her feet to climb the Hennings' porch steps. In some ways she couldn't truly grieve Jake's death until now, when she could share it with everyone else who made up her world.

She knocked on Sue's door and took a slow breath. *Give me the strength, God ... please.*

The door opened and Sue appeared. Her smile faded as soon as the two of them made eye contact. “Jamie ... what is it?” Sue's voice was breathless, her eyes filled with fear.

Jamie only held up her hand and swallowed back another sob. “Give me ... let me talk to Sierra first. Okay?”

Sue hesitated for only a moment. Then she hurried back into the house and returned with Sierra. The child stopped, her eyes wide when she saw that her mother was crying. “Mommy, what's wrong?”

Jamie held out her hands and picked Sierra up the way Jake had always done. The way Eric had done. One day, when she was old enough to understand, Jamie would explain about the man who had lived with them after the attacks on New York City. But for now, the simple delayed truth was all the child would understand.

“Baby ... Mommy has some sad news to tell you ...”

## Vier-en-dertig

4 Desember 2001

Dit neem hulle nie lank om alles te reël nie.

Noudat Eric se vrou weet hy lewe, het Jamie geen ander keuse as om die oproep te maak nie. 'n Oproep wat die man wat soos Jake lyk, van haar af sal

wegneem na die huis waar hy hoort, 'n oproep wat Jamie se hart so leeg soos haar huis sal laat.

Eric het haar gevra om die praatwerk te doen, want nadat hy so lank weg was, nadat hy so baie verander het, wil hy nie met sy vrou praat voordat hy van aangesig tot aangesig voor haar staan nie.

Dus bel sy die vrou, en verduidelik so eenvoudig moontlik wat met haar man gebeur het. "Hy ... hy kon my man se tweeling gewees het." Jamie sit langs Eric en hou sy hand vas terwyl sy die situasie aan Laura Michaels verduidelik. "Dit was eers toe hy begin terugflitse kry dat ons besef het hy is moontlik nie die man met wie ek getrou het nie."

Die vrou luister en die paar maal dat sy vrae het, is haar stem vol empatie. Sy vra net een maal uit oor die vriendskap wat daar vanselfsprekend tussen Eric en Jamie ontwikkel het. "Het ... is my man lief vir jou?"

'n Knop vorm in Laura se keel en sy gee Eric se hand 'n drukkie. "Ons het baie goeie vriende geword." Sy snuif en forseer haarself om kalm te bly. Sy kyk na Eric terwyl sy verder praat. "Maar hy is jou man, mev. Michaels. Hy wil so gou moontlik huis toe gaan."

'n Uur later bel Laura haar met die vlugreëlings. Sy sal die volgende oggend La Guardia toe vlieg en Eric van daar af huis toe vergesel. Wat Jamie betref, sal dit die einde wees, die einde van twee maande waarin sy geglo het haar man lewe. Die einde van haar hoop dat daar net 'n paar herinneringe tussen haar en die lewe staan wat sy en Jake gedeel het.

Nadat Jamie afgelui het, gee sy Eric 'n drukkie en fluister by sy oor. "Bid vir Sierra ... dit gaan swaar wees vir haar."

"Ag, Jamie, ek's jammer ... Ek wou nooit hê so iets moes gebeur nie." Hy streel oor haar rug toe 'n snik uit haar binneste skeur. "As my geheue net vroeër teruggekom het, sou niks hiervan ooit ... "

Sy laat hom gaan en plaas 'n vinger oor sy mond. "Nee, Eric, die Here wou jou hier gehad het." Sy snuif en glimlag vir hom deur haar trane. "Hoe moeilik dit ook al vir ons almal gaan wees ... dit was sy plan dat jy hierdie paar maande in my lewe moes wees." Sy gee 'n hartseer laggie en vee oor haar wange. "Dink daaraan. Sonder jou sou ek nooit in die Here begin glo het nie. En jy ... " Sy vee nog trane af. "Jy sou steeds 'n sakeman gewees het wat nie weet hoe om lief te hê nie." Sy skud haar kop en omraam sy gesig sag met haar hande. "En nou ... vir so lank jy lewe, sal jy 'n stukkie van Jake Bryan saam met jou neem."

"Maar hoe ... " Eric se stem is skaars meer as 'n fluistering, en sy woorde gesmoord. "Hoe gaan ek ooit totsiens sê?"

Jamie en Eric bring hulle laaste aand saam met Sierra deur.

Hulle eet Hawaise pizza en Eric haal al sy pynappelstukkies pligsgetrou af en gee dit vir Sierra wat 'n paar weke gelede aangekondig het dat sy die pynappelprinses is. Ná ete maak Eric en Jamie beurte om vir haar te lees, en uiteindelik gaan sit hulle aan weerskante van haar op die bank en kyk *The Little Mermaid*. Toe die meermin aan die einde besluit om op land te gaan

lewe en haar pa vir oulaas moet groet, laat Eric die trane ongehinderd oor sy wange loop. Hy hoef nie na Jamie te kyk nie; hy weet dat sy huil.

Die slaaptydritueel verloop soos elke ander aand, behalwe dat Eric Sierra hierdie keer goeienag soen en vir die laaste keer by haar kamer uitloop. Nadat hy haar deur togetrek het en twee tree gegee het, draai hy na Jamie en val in haar arms. “Sy verdien ’n pa, Jamie.” Hy maak ’n sagte, desperate geluid. “Dit vernietig my om te dink dat sy ná môre nie een gaan hê nie.”

Jamie huil ook, maar sy openbaar ’n sterkte wat hom verbaas. Dis duidelik dat sy oor hierdie afskeid gebid het en God gevra het om haar hart voor te berei en haar te dra. Eric kan maar net hoop dat die Here dieselfde vir hom sal doen. ’n Deel van hom kan nie wag om weer by Laura te wees, om vir haar te wys dat hy verander het en haar te smee om hom te vergewe vir die manier waarop hy haar in die verlede behandel het nie. Sy herinneringe kom nou vinnig terug, en hy weet dat hy sy vrou en seuntjie so te sê versaak het.

Hy bid dat hulle hom sal vergewe.

Maar alhoewel hy daarna uitsien om by hulle te wees, voel hy verskeurd as hy daaraan dink dat hy Jamie en Sierra moet los. Toe hy en Jamie mekaar daardie aand by die trap groet en elkeen na hulle kamers toe gaan, het Eric die oorweldigende begeerte om haar te volg. Om langs haar te lê en haar vas te hou, haar lief te hê en saam met haar te huil en te wens dat die oggend nooit kom nie.

Hy verwerp die gedagte amper onmiddellik en gee haar bloot ’n drukkie voordat hy haar op die wang soen. Hy slaap toe sy kop aan die kussing raak en hy droom die hele nag van Laura en Josh. Sê nou hulle wil hom nie terughê nie? Dalk kan die skade wat hy aangerig het, nie reggemaak word nie. Vrae en vreemde brokkies van verbeelde gesprekke speel die hele nag in sy gedagtes af.

Na wat soos vyf minute voel, word hy wakker van Jamie en Sierra wat in die kombuis besig is. Sy het gesê hy kan een van Jake se uitrustings huis toe dra. Verder het hy niks om in te pak nie. Alles wat hy gedink het syne is, het in werklikheid aan Jake behoort.

Eric stort en toe hy skeer, merk hy verbaas op hoe die letsels op sy gesig vervaag het. Hy moet steeds versigtig wees met die nuwe vel, maar dit blyk dat die dokter reg was. Uiteindelik sal dit amper onmoontlik wees om te sien wat Eric deurgemaak het.

Behalwe vir iemand wat in sy hart sou kon kyk.

Hy gaan kombuis toe en Sierra pyl reguit op hom af, nes sy nog elke keer gedoen het vandat hy uit die hospitaal gekom het. Jamie glimlag vir hom en hy knipoog vir haar voordat hy sy aandag by Sierra bepaal.

“Pappa! Raai wat!”

Eric moet swaar sluk om sy trane te keer. “Wat?”

“Mamma bak bloubessie-plaatkoekies! Is Pappa nie bly nie? Dis my heel lekkerstes!”

Hy raap haar in sy arms op en vryf met sy neus teen hare. *Vader ... kyk na*

*hierdie kind ... en gee haar eendag die pa wat sy nodig het. Asseblief, Here.*  
“Jy lyk vandag soos ’n prinses, liefie.”

“Ja, maar my hare is te reguit, en Mamma sê ek kan by Katy gaan speel.” Sy hou haar gesig ’n entjie weg en laat sak haar ken op ’n manier wat sy hart vermurwe. “Kan Pappa dit indraai? Selfs al is dit nie Sondag nie?”

Eric knip sy oë om die trane te keer. “Natuurlik, patat. Ek dink ook dis ’n goeie dag vir krulle.” Hy sit Sierra op die vloer neer en kyk hoe sy vooruit eetkamer toe trippel. Toe gaan staan hy langs Jamie en praat naby haar oor. “Ek weet nie of ek dit kan doen nie.”

Sy snuif en lig haar oë vir ’n paar oomblikke. “Ek is al van vieruur af op ... en het lank met die Here gepraat.” Die plaatkoekies sis en sy draai dit om. Dan kyk sy na hom en glimlag. Haar oë is droog, maar hy kan sien sy het gehuil. “Jy kan dit doen, Eric. Ons albei kan. En eendag sal alles weer oukei wees. God het my belowe.”

Hulle neem hulle plekke aan tafel in en Sierra babbel oor volgende jaar wanneer sy kleuterskool toe gaan, en dat dit amper Kersfees is en die feit dat pynappel haar gunstelingvrug is. Eintlik tweede gunsteling ná bloubessies.

Toe hulle klaar geëet het, kyk Eric na Jamie. “Kan ek jou met die skottelgoed help?”

“Nee, dankie.” Sy skud haar kop en haar oë blink verraderlik. “Ek dink jy moet ’n sekere prinsessie se hare gaan indraai.”

Eric volg Sierra na Jamie se kamer en prop die krultang in. Dis ’n ritueel wat hy weke gelede al gewoonnd geraak het en dit het ’n spesiale tydjie geword waartydens hy en Sierra gesels. Sierra wip voor die spieëltafel in die badkamer rond en kyk na Jamie se grimering en parfuumbottels, salig onbewus van die manier waarop haar lewe vandag gaan verander.

Toe die krultang warm is, klik hy dit drie maal. Dis sy teken dat Sierra na hom toe moet kom en kom stilstaan terwyl hy werk. Sy kom staan met haar rug na hom en laat haar lang blonde hare teen haar rug aftuimel. Eric maak die tang oop en knyp ’n gedeelte van Sierra se hare daarin vas. Hy draai dit halfpad op.

“So, jy gaan vandag ’n bietjie by Katy speel?”

“Jip.” Sierra hou haar kennetjie in die lug, versigtig om nie te beweeg nie. “Katy het nog nooit my hare met krulle gesien nie.”

Eric draai lok vir lok in totdat die mooi krulle soos ’n stralekrans om haar gesiggie is. Hy prop die krultang uit en sit dit op die toonbank neer waar dit kan afkoel.

Toe hoor hulle Jamie roep. “Sierra ... ek moet jou by Katy gaan aflaai. Kom, my skat ... dis tyd.”

Sierra kreukel haar neus vir Eric. “Dankie, Pappa. Pappa maak die heel mooiste krulle in die hele wêreld.”

Eric lig haar kennetjie met sy wysvinger en kyk reguit in haar oë. “Weet jy wat?”

“Wat?” Haar kinder-ogies dans soos altyd wanneer sy by hom is.

“Mamma is beter met hare indraai as ek.” Eric praat sagter en kyk vinnig na

die deur. “Eintlik is sy die beste indraaier in die hele wêreld. Sy wil net nie hê almal moet weet nie.”

Sierra se oë rek. “Rêrig?”

“Rêrig.” Eric se hart breek. “Ek dink Mamma moet hierdie Sondag voor kerk ’n beurt kry om jou hare in te draai.” Hy slaag daarin om te glimlag. “Reg so?”

“Reg! Kan ek vir haar gaan sê?”

Eric skud sy kop vinnig. “Nog nie. Eers Sondagoggend, oukei?”

“Oukei.” Sierra neem hom aan die hand en lei hom na die deur toe. “Ons moet nou ry. Katy wag vir my.”

Jamie wag in die portaal en kyk hoe hulle hand aan hand met die trappies afkom. Sy praat met Sierra, maar kyk na Eric. “Dis tyd om te ry. Sê tata vir Pappa, dan neem ek jou na Katy toe.” Sy gee ’n paar treë terug, haar oë steeds op Eric. Hy verstaan. Sy wil hom die geleentheid gee om vir oulaas totsiens te sê.

Eric byt op sy tande en kniel. Hy ontmoet Sierra se oë vir die laaste keer en fluister: “Kom hier, my liefie.”

Sy slaan haar armpies om sy nek. “Tatta, Pappa. Pappa moet ’n lekker dag hê.”

Dit voel vir Eric of ’n snik in sy keel vassit en vir ’n volle minuut kan hy niks sê nie. Hy hou haar net vas, streel oor haar rug en smee God om die pa te wees wat sy ná vanoggend nie gaan hê nie. Toe hy uiteindelik kan praat, hou hy haar ’n entjie van hom weg en glimlag. “Ek is lief vir jou, Sierra. Jy weet dit, nè, my liefste?”

Sy giggel. “Lawwe Pappa. Ek weet mos. Pappa is die liefste vir my in die wêreld.”

“Dis reg, my skat. Die heel liefste.” Eric kan skaars asemhaal. Hy lig sy wenkbroue. “Vlindersoentjies?”

Sy klap haar handjies en knik opgewonde. Hy bring sy gesig tot teen hare en vryf drie maal met sy neus teen hare. Daarna fladder hulle hul wimpers teen mekaar se wange. Toe hulle klaar is, sit hy sy hande op haar skouertjies neer. “Totsiens, Sierra.” Op daardie oomblik onthou hy iets uit Jake se dagboek, iets wat Jake altyd vir Sierra gesê het wanneer hy soggens werk toe gegaan het. “Soet wees, my skat. En moenie vergeet om tot Jesus te bid nie.”

“Oukei.” Sy soen hom nog ’n keer voordat sy omswaai en na haar ma toe hardloop. Met een laaste wuif oor haar skouer neem sy haar ma se hand en hulle verdwyn in die garage.

Eric staan op en gaan sit op die derde trappie, sy kop in sy hande. Hy luister hoe Sierra en Jamie in die motor klim terwyl Sierra aanhoudend babbel oor haar kuier by Katy. Hy hoor die garagedeur oopgaan, hoe Jamie die motor uittrek en stadig wegry.

Toe eers kom sy trane, trane wat hy nog heeltyd onderdruk sedert hy uitgevind het wie hy regtig is. Hy huil oor Sierra wat vanmiddag gaan uitvind dat haar pappa in ’n brand dood is, en oor Jamie wat haar alleen sal moet



grootmaak. Maar hy huil ook oor homself, en oor die stukkie van sy hart wat sopas saam met 'n vierjarige dogtertjie weggeery het.

Enetjie vir wie hy nooit weer vlindersoentjies sal gee nie.

Jamie het die afgelope paar dae geweet dat die pyn nie in al sy felheid sou kom voordat sy Eric gegroet het nie. Sy was eerlik oor die tyd wat sy saam met die Here deurgebring het en die belofte wat Hy daardie oggend vir haar gegee het. Sy was in gebed en het met die Bybel op haar skoot gesit, besig om Jake se onderstreepte gedeeltes te lees toe sy baie duidelik 'n fluisterstem in haar hart gehoor het.

*Ek sal jou nooit verlaat nie, nooit in die steek laat nie, my dogter. Ek weet wat Ek vir jou beplan, voorspoed en nie teenspoed nie; Ek wil vir jou 'n toekoms gee, 'n verwagting.*

*Ek weet wat ek vir jou beplan ... 'n toekoms, 'n verwagting.*

Jamie het nog nooit vir mooi clichés tyd gehad nie, en weggebly van dweperige mense wat 'n Bybelversie vir elke situasie in die lewe het. Maar die woorde wat sy daardie oggend gehoor het, het van God self gekom. Dit het lewe in haar binneste geblaas toe die hartseer verstikkend in haar opgebou het.

Nadat sy Sierra by Sue afgelaai het, ry Jamie en Eric saam na La Guardia. Sy weet dit gaan waarskynlik ongemaklik wees, maar sy wil Laura sien, wil Eric en die ander vrou bymekaar sien sodat sy uitsluitel en klaarheid oor hierdie tyd in haar lewe kan kry. Twee minute van die huis af steek Eric sy hand uit en vleg sy vingers deur hare.

“Jy was wonderlik vir my, Jamie.” Hy kyk ondersoekend na haar, sy oë steeds rooi van die trane wat hy seker moes gehuil het nadat hy Sierra gegroet het.

“Dankie.” Sy glimlag en kyk weer voor haar na die pad.

Daar is min verkeer en die rit neem korter as gewoonlik. Nadat sy parkeer het, loop hulle na 'n sekuriteitspunt waar die lughawe 'n waglokaal ingerig het vir gaste. Sedert 11 September word gaste nie meer toegelaat om sonder 'n instapkaart tot by die hek te gaan nie.

Jamie kyk op haar horlosie en lei Eric na 'n stil plek naby 'n glasmuur agter in die waglokaal. Laura Michaels se vlug is veronderstel om oor drie minute neer te stryk.

Hulle gaan sit teen die vensters, half na mekaar gedraai. Jamie neem haar handsak en bring 'n toegedraaide pakkie te voorskyn. Dis asof die pyn in haar hart na haar arm versprei en dit voel asof die geskenk van lood gemaak is. “Hier.” Sy gee dit vir Eric. “Dit is jou Kersgeskenk.”

Eric neem die pakkie en vir 'n paar lang oomblikke kyk hy na haar, sy blik verlore in hare. Jamie wil huil, maar sy kan nie. Nie nou al nie. Sy knik na die pakkie in Eric se hande en uiteindelik kyk hy af. Hy skeur die papier af en gooi dit in 'n asblik naby hulle. Binne-in die pakkie is 'n paar gebinde bladsye. Op die voorste bladsy het Jamie in blou letters geskryf: “Vir ingeval jy vergeet ...”

Hy maak die dekblad oop en Jamie hoor hoe sy asem in sy keel vassteek. Sy

het dosyne bladsye uit Jake se dagboek gefotostateer – sleutelinskrywings oor die belangrikheid van pa-wees en die vreugde van getroud wees met sy beste maat. Agterin is nog ’n stuk of twintig bladsye, fotostate van Jake se Bybel, kompleet met die onderstreepte gedeeltes en kantlynaantekeninge.

Hy kyk weer in haar oë en weet hy hoef niks te sê nie. Hy hou die bladsye styf teen sy bors vas en trek haar nader. “Jamie ... ek sal jou nooit vergeet nie. Nie vir jou of vir Jake nie.”

Sy tel haar kop op, onwillig om nou in trane uit te bars en hulle laaste oomblikke te bederf. “Julle is so dieselfde, Eric.” Haar glimlag is opreg, want iewers in haar binneste weet sy hoe waardevol hulle tyd saam was. “Eendag in die hemel sal julle twee baie hê om oor te gesels.”

’n Stroom mense begin deur die sekuriteitshek beweeg en Eric draai om. Jamie wonder of hy al sy vrou kan sien. Toe beduie hy met sy vinger, sy stem vol emosie. “Daar is sy. Daar agter.”

Hy draai weer na Jamie en hulle sit ’n paar oomblikke na mekaar en kyk. Dis tyd ... oor ’n paar minute gaan hy vir altyd uit haar lewe wees. “Ek is lief vir jou, Jamie. Danksy jou is ek ’n nuwe mens. Danksy Jake.”

Sy luister, steeds getref deur hoe maklik hy Jake kón wees. Sy kan haar trane voel kom, maar sy knik net vir hom. “Jy moet gaan, Eric.” Jamie kyk vinnig na die blonde vrou wat nader aan die waglokaal beweeg. “Sy soek na jou.”

Eric knik. “Wil jy haar ontmoet?”

“Nee.” Jamie sukkel om te praat. “Ek moet liever ry. Buitendien ... julle moet al weer op die volgende vlug wees.”

“Oukei.” Hy byt op sy tande, sy oë steeds soekend in hare. “Gee vir Sierra ’n drukkie van my af.”

Jamie knik vinnig, en die oomblik is verby. Eric vou sy arms om haar en hou haar ’n paar sekondes lank vas, die laaste keer ooit. Toe draai hy sonder ’n verdere woord om en loop. Jamie kyk hoe hy deur die wagtende mense vleg totdat sy vrou hom uiteindelik raaksien. Die blonde vrou begin vinniger loop, haar mond oop van iets soos ongeloof en skok. Toe sy by hom kom, swaai Eric haar in sy arms.

Iets sny deur Jamie se hart en haar trane begin vloei.

Sy knipper haar oë sodat sy beter kan sien en kyk hoe die vrou hom vol op die mond soen. Vir ’n oomblik praat hulle met mekaar, hulle gesigte sentimeters van mekaar af, onbewus van die malende passasiers rondom hulle.

Dan haak die vrou haar arm deur syne en Eric vergesel haar na die sekuriteitspunt waardeur hulle moet gaan voordat hulle aan boord van hulle vliegtuig kan gaan. Hy kyk nie weer om nie.

“Totsiens, Eric ... kyk mooi na haar.” Jamie fluister die woorde en met ’n hart wat breek, draai sy stadig weg van die man wat sy gedink het haar man was, die man wat haar – danksy Jake – geleer het om God lief te hê en sonder vrees te lewe. Die man wat – danksy Jake – geleer het om weer lief te hê.

Sy loop verby honderde mense sonder om enigiemand raak te sien. Elke tree neem haar verder weg van die denkbild dat sy Jake op die een of ander

manier aan die lewe kan hou, dat sy 'n stukkie van Jake kan behou deur saam met Eric te bly.

Ses minute later ry sy haar nuwe lewe tegemoet. Die een waarin sy net Jake se woorde sal hê om haar aan 'n man te herinner wie se liefde vir 'n leeftyd in haar hart sal bly. 'n Liefde wat nooit deur 'n terroriste-aanval weggeneem kan word nie. 'n Liefde wat in haar sal voortleef, wat haar sal laat groei en verander. En nie net vir haar nie, maar ook vir Eric Michaels. 'n Liefde wat lank nadat die puin van 11 September opgeruim is, steeds daar sal wees.

Jamie bestuur met die venster oop, en die koue wind brand op haar betraande wange. Sy gun haarself die tydjie om te treur, nie net oor die verlies van Jake nie, maar ook oor Eric en die tasbare teenwoordigheid van haar man se liefde – selfs al het dit in die gedaante van 'n vreemdeling gekom.

Nou moet sy met Sierra gaan praat en vir haar dogtertjie sê dat haar pappa dood is. Dit is die swaarste nuus wat sy ooit in haar lewe sal oordra, nuus wat haar sou vernietig as dit nie vir die tyd was wat sy vanoggend en die afgelope maande by die Here deurgebring het nie. Haar krag kom net van Hom af, van die waarheid wat sy ontdek het deur Jake se Bybel te lees.

'n Waarheid wat nou in haar hart lewe.

Sy draai by die Hennings se oprit in, parkeer en dwing haarself om uit te klim. Uiteindelik was dit die regte besluit om die waarheid van Sue en die res te weerhou. Dit was moeilik genoeg vir haar en Eric om dit te aanvaar. Om dit vir iemand anders te vertel, kon potensieel situasies geskep het waarvoor nie een van hulle kans gesien het nie. Nie dat Sue die koerante sou bel nie. Maar dit sou uitgelek het, en wat dan? Dit was nie wat hulle wou hê nie. En deur die nuus vir hulleself te hou, kon hulle hul op die belangrike toespits – om Eric te help om sy pad terug te vind.

Dis met swaar voete dat Jamie na die Hennings se voordeur loop. In sekere opsigte kan sy nou eers oor Jake se dood begin rou, nou dat sy dit met die mense in haar lewe kan deel.

Sy klop aan Sue se deur en trek haar asem stadig in. *Gee my die krag, Here ... asseblief.*

Die deur gaan oop en Sue verskyn. Haar glimlag vervaag toe hulle oogkontak maak. “Jamie ... wat is dit?” Sue se stem is 'n fluistering en daar is vrees in haar oë.

Jamie hou haar hand op en sluk. “Gee my ... Ek moet eers met Sierra praat, oukei?”

Sue aarsel net vir 'n oomblik voor sy haastig na die woonkamer loop en vir Sierra gaan haal. Die kind steek vas, haar oë groot toe sy haar ma sien huil. “Mamma, wat is fout?”

Jamie steek haar hande uit en tel Sierra op. Nes Jake, en nes Eric altyd gedoen het. Wanneer Sierra eendag oud genoeg is, sal sy haar vertel van die man wat na afloop van die aanvalle op New York by hulle gebly het. Maar tot tyd en wyl sal die kind net die eenvoudige, uitgestelde waarheid verstaan.

“Liefie ... Mamma moet vir jou iets hartseers vertel ... ”



# Chapter THIRTY-FIVE

DECEMBER 5, 2001

Eric hadn't stopped talking since Laura met him at the airport. The whole way back to Los Angeles, he caught her up on all that happened to him since he woke up in the New York hospital.

Laura was dumbfounded by the story. "So you really thought you were this ... this Jake Bryan?"

"I didn't know any different." Eric took hold of her hand, and she tried not to look shocked. How long had it been since he'd held her hand? Laura couldn't even remember, but she dared to hope that maybe ... just maybe he'd had a change of heart living with this Jamie woman.

He launched into another chapter of the story, the part where he'd found the dead man's journal and Bible. "For two weeks all I did was read that thing. I memorized everything about what it meant to love my family and care for the people around me."

Laura wasn't sure what to say. "Jake was a great guy, huh?"

"Better than great." Eric looked around as though he were searching for the words. "He loved God so much, Laura. So much. And everything about his life and his family was a reflection of that love."

Constantly throughout the conversation, Laura had to remind herself she wasn't dreaming. It was one thing to have the shock of finding out Eric was alive. And another altogether to dare to dream he'd become the man of her dreams while living the life of a man she'd never met.

They were crossing Arizona by the time Eric finished the story. "So what I want to say, Laura, is ... I'm sorry." He drew close to her and kissed her slowly on the lips.

Again she had to convince herself that the moment was real. Eric never kissed her like that, not in years. He pulled back some and studied her eyes.

"I remember now, and I know how awful I've been." His eyes

narrowed, and the pain there was something he'd never let her see before. "And I remember Sarah."

Tears filled her eyes as soon as he spoke her name. "I never knew ..." She shook her head. "I found the card you'd written for her. I ... I thought I'd never get to talk about her with you."

"I should've told you sooner, worked it out with you." He pulled her close again and held her, unaware of the flight attendants or passengers or turbulence as they headed over California. "Can you ever forgive me?"

Laura leaned back and wiped at her eyes. "We have so much to work through. Of course I forgive you, Eric." She sniffed and held her breath, refusing the sobs that gathered in her throat. "You never gave me a chance."

They talked more after that, and Eric told her everything he remembered about losing little Sarah and turning his back on God. For Laura it was like having her first drink of water after a decade in the desert. The feeling was more miraculous than anything she could've imagined.

Nothing about it wore off that first day. When Eric walked through the door of their home, Clay was there, and he hugged Eric long and hard while Josh stood quietly in the background. "Clay ..."

"We thought ..." Clay squeezed his eyes shut and tightened his grip on Eric. "We thought you were dead, big brother."

Laura watched the brothers hug through teary eyes. Clay's feelings had to be mixed. Of course he was thrilled that Eric was alive. The two had miles of ground to make up. But there was something painful about the entire situation as well, something Clay hadn't voiced to her, and probably never would.

But whatever he was feeling, he was careful to hide it now that Eric was home.

When the two men pulled apart, Laura watched Eric take a step toward Josh. The child looked frightened, as though he were seeing a ghost. Or maybe he was simply scared by the change in Eric. Laura had

tried to warn him the night before.

“Daddy's coming home,” she'd told him. “He's got a hurt face, and he might look a little different.”

Josh hadn't said much. Clearly Josh wasn't altogether sure he wanted his father back. After all, the man had done little over the past years but hurt his son with broken promises and a lack of affection.

Now Eric's voice was thick as he stooped down to the boy's level. “Come here, Josh.”

Laura watched their son and did what she could to remember to exhale. *God ... let things be different between them ... please.*

Josh blinked and stared at the floor for a moment. Then with short tentative steps he made his way to Eric. Laura willed him to keep moving toward his father. As he did, Eric smiled in a way that once again made Laura think she was dreaming. The old Eric would never have taken time to single out their son, not unless he was in trouble.

Josh stopped a few feet from Eric. “Yes, sir?”

Eric held out his arms, and as he did, a confused look fell over Josh's face. Eric closed the gap between them and pulled him into a hug that lasted half a minute. Afterwards, he drew back and kissed his son on the cheek. “I love you, Josh. I haven't told you nearly enough, but I love you.”

Josh looked at Laura and raised his eyebrows. Laura didn't know whether to laugh or cry. The poor child had no idea what to make of the change that had come over his father.

He shrugged and met Eric's eyes again. “Thanks.”

Eric was undaunted by Josh's ambiguity. He grinned and gave Josh another quick hug. “How 'bout a bike ride tonight? Me and you and Mom ...” Eric shot a smile at Clay. “And Uncle Clay if he wants.”

Clay cleared his throat and stepped forward. “Actually, I was just leaving.” He smiled at Eric and patted his shoulder. “You and Laura need time alone together.”

“Okay ... but come back tomorrow. I want to have a barbecue for all

of us.” He looked at Laura and held her gaze. “And let's call my dad. I want him to know things are different now. Time's too short to waste.”

He looked back at Josh. “And guess what? I learned how to jet ski, buddy. I can't wait to teach you. But first we have our bike ride tonight ...”

Through it all, Josh only stared at him, his mouth open. Laura could see in his eyes something that hadn't been there before, not as far back as she could remember.

Something that looked an awful lot like hope.

Eric made good on his promises that evening, and for enough days in a row that finally Laura actually believed it. A miracle had taken place, a miracle only God Almighty could've brought about. And all because the words of one very special man had taught her husband everything he needed to know about love and faithfulness.

Laura wondered about Jake Bryan.

Because the story of her life wouldn't be complete until some far-off day when she would find him on the streets of heaven and thank him for the footprints he'd left behind.

Footprints she was starting to believe Eric would follow until the day he died.

## **Vyf-en-dertig**

5 Desember 2001

Eric het nog nie ophou praat sedert Laura hom by die lughawe ontmoet het nie. Hy vertel haar die hele pad tot in Los Angeles wat alles met hom gebeur het sedert hy in die hospitaal in New York wakker geword het.

Laura luister stomgeslaan. “Jy het met ander woorde regtig gedink dat jy hierdie ... hierdie Jake Bryan was?”

“Ek het nie van beter geweet nie.” Eric neem haar hand en sy probeer om nie geskok te lyk nie. Wanneer laas het hy haar hand vasgehou? Sy kan nie eens onthou nie, maar sy durf hoop iets het in sy hart verander gedurende sy verblyf by hierdie Jamie-vrou. Hy spring na nog 'n hoofstuk van die storie, die gedeelte waar hy die oorlede man se dagboek en Bybel begin lees het. “Ek het twee weke lank niks anders gedoen as om te lees nie. Ek het alles gememoriseer oor wat dit beteken om my gesin lief te hê en vir die mense



rondom my om te gee.”

Laura weet nie mooi wat om te sê nie. “Jake moes ’n wonderlike man gewees het.”

“Meer as wonderlik.” Eric kyk rond asof hy na woorde soek. “Hy was so lief vir die Here, Laura. So lief. En alles in sy lewe en sy gesin was ’n weerspieëling van daardie liefde.”

Gedurende die gesprek moet Laura haarself konstant daaraan herinner dat sy nie droom nie. Dis een ding om tot die skokkende besef te kom dat Eric nie dood is nie. Dis iets anders om te durf hoop hy het die man van haar drome geword terwyl hy ’n wildvreemde man se lewe gelei het.

Hulle vlieg oor Arizona toe Eric sy verhaal afsluit. “Wat ek wil sê, Laura, is ... ek’s jammer.” Hy leun nader en soen haar stadig op die mond.

Sy moet haarself weereens oortuig dat dit nie ’n droom is nie. Eric het haar nooit só gesoen nie, nie in jare nie. Hy laat haar gaan en kyk ondersoekend in haar oë.

“Ek het my geheue herwin en ek weet hoe aaklig ek was.” Sy oë vernou en sy sien iets van die pyn wat hy nooit teenoor haar laat blyk het nie. “En ek onthou vir Sarah.”

Haar oë raak vol tranes toe hy haar naam noem. “Ek het nooit geweet nie ... ” Sy skud haar kop. “Ek het op die kaartjie afgekom wat jy geskryf het. Ek ... ek het gedink ek sou nooit die kans hê om met jou oor haar te praat nie.”

“Ek moes jou vroeër daarvan vertel het, dit saam met jou verwerk het.” Hy trek haar weer nader en hou haar vas, onbewus van die lugwaardinne of passasiers of turbulensie toe hulle oor Kalifornië vlieg. “Sal jy my ooit kan vergewe?”

Laura leun terug en vee oor haar oë. “Daar is soveel waardeur ons moet werk. Natuurlik vergewe ek jou, Eric.” Sy snuif en hou haar asem op, onwillig om nou aan die snik te gaan. “Jy het my nooit ’n kans gegee nie.”

Hulle gesels verder en Eric vertel haar wat hy alles rondom Sarah se dood onthou, hoe hy sy rug op God gekeer het. Vir Laura is dit soos ’n eerste slukkie water ná ’n dekade in die woestyn. Dis ’n groter wonderwerk as waarvoor sy kon bid of vra.

Dit bly die hele dag vir haar ’n wonder. Clay is by die huis toe sy en Eric daar aankom, en hy druk Eric styf vas terwyl Josh stil op die agtergrond bly. “Clay ... ”

“Ons het gedink ... ” Clay knyp sy oë toe en sy arms span stywer om Eric. “Ons het gedink jy is dood, ouboet.”

Laura kyk deur haar tranes hoe die twee broers mekaar omhels. Clay moet sekerlik gemengde gevoelens hê. Natuurlik is hy verheug dat Eric nog lewe. Hulle twee het soveel om oor te praat. Maar daar is ook iets pynliks aan die hele situasie, iets wat Clay nie teenoor haar verwoord het nie, en waarskynlik nooit sal nie.

Ongeag sy gevoelens is hy versigtig om dit weg te steek nou dat Eric tuis is. Toe die mans mekaar laat gaan, kyk Laura hoe Eric na Josh toe gaan. Die kind

lyk verskrik, asof hy 'n spook sien. Of dalk is dit die verandering in Eric wat hom bang maak. Laura het hom die vorige aand probeer waarsku.

“Pappa kom huis toe,” het sy gesê. “Sy gesig het seergekry en hy gaan dalk 'n bietjie anders lyk.”

Josh het nie veel gesê nie. Hy was duidelik nie heeltemal seker of hy sy pa wou terughê nie. Die man het die afgelope jare immers min gedoen buiten om sy seun met leë beloftes en 'n gebrek aan aandag seer te maak.

Eric se stem is vol emosie toe hy tot op Josh se hoogte hurk. “Kom hier, Josh.”

Laura kyk na hulle seuntjie en forseer haarself om asem te haal. *Here ... laat dinge verander tussen hulle ... asseblief.*

Josh knip sy oë en kyk vir 'n oomblik na die vloer. Toe loop hy met kort, onseker treë na Eric toe. Laura wens sy kon hom tot by sy pa stoot. Maar Eric glimlag op 'n manier wat dit weer vir Laura laat voel of sy droom. Die ou Eric sou nooit die moeite gedoen het om hulle seuntjie uit te sonder nie, nie tensy hy in die moeilikheid was nie.

Josh gaan staan 'n meter of twee van Eric af. “Ja, Pa?”

Toe Eric sy arms uitsteek, flits 'n verwarde uitdrukking oor Josh se gesig. Eric kniel nader en druk sy seuntjie 'n goeie halfminuut teen hom vas. Toe hy hom laat gaan, soen hy hom op die wang. “Ek's lief vir jou, Josh. Ek het dit heeltemal te min vir jou gesê, my kind, maar ek is lief vir jou.”

Josh kyk na Laura en lig sy wenkbroue. Laura weet nie of sy moet lag of huil nie. Die arme kind het nie 'n idee hoe om hierdie verandering in sy pa te verstaan nie.

Hy haal sy skouers op en kyk weer na Eric. “Dankie.”

Eric is nie van stryk gebring deur Josh se halfhartigheid nie. Hy glimlag en gee hom nog 'n vinnige drukkie. “Hoe lyk dit, gaan ons later 'n bietjie fietsry? Ek en jy en Mamma ...” Eric glimlag vir Clay. “En oom Clay as hy wil.”

Clay maak keel skoon en kom nader. “Eintlik was ek net op pad.” Hy glimlag vir Eric en klop hom op die skouer. “Jy en Laura het 'n bietjie tyd alleen nodig.”

“Nou goed ... maar kom kuier môre, dan braai ons.” Sy oog vang Laura s'n en hy kyk na haar. “En kom ons bel my pa. Ek wil hê hy moet weet dinge het verander. Die lewe is te kort vir tydmoers.”

Hy kyk weer na Josh. “En raai wat? Ek het leer waterponie ry. Ek kan nie wag om jou te wys nie. Maar vandag gaan ons eers fietsry.”

Josh staar deur die hele relaas na hom, sy mond oop. Laura sien iets in sy oë wat nie voorheen daar was nie, nie sedert sy kan onthou nie.

Iets wat baie soos hoop lyk.

Daardie aand kom Eric sy belofte na, sowel as in die daaropvolgende dae. Uiteindelik moet Laura begin glo 'n wonderwerk het plaasgevind, dat God die woorde van 'n kosbare man gebruik het om haar man alles te leer wat hy van liefde en getrouheid moet weet.

Laura dink soms aan Jake Bryan.

Haar lewensverhaal sal immers eers volledig wees wanneer sy hom eendag in die verre toekoms in die hemel ontmoet en dankie kan sê vir die voetspore wat hy agtergelaat het.

Voetspore waarin Eric sy lewe lank sal loop.

# Chapter THIRTY-SIX

SEPTEMBER 11, 2002

A year had passed since the terrorist attacks, and summer had blended quickly into fall. Somehow Jamie had survived it, survived telling the truth to the guys at the station and breaking the news to Jake's father when he returned from his cross-country trip. She had kept her promise to Eric and refused to tell his identity to anyone who asked, even the few reporters who had managed to call her after news of Jake's death was reported in the paper.

They'd found his body—his and Larry's, side by side—on a spring day when the remains of more than a dozen firefighters were found. The department had given both of them a proper funeral—the type Jamie no longer had any reason to dread. Jake's helmet sat on Sierra's dresser now, a constant reminder that her daddy was up in heaven, waiting for the far-off day when they'd be together again.

In some ways Jake's presence lived on in their home, brought to life again and again each time Jamie read the words in his journal. She was still learning the depth of how he'd loved them, how he'd cherished his time with God and his family.

Every now and then Jamie could hear her father's warning, the one he'd spoken to her as he peered over his newspaper so long ago, back when she first fell in love with Jake. *It's a tough job, fighting fires in New York City. The danger's always there, Jamie, as close as the next call.*

In the end her father had been right about that. But he'd been wrong about the rest, the part where he'd told her that a man didn't need anyone but himself, that religion was a sign of weakness. Jake Bryan would always be the strongest man she knew ... so strong that even now his words, his faith, his love were sometimes all that held her up—even from as far away as heaven.

And God had given her other help too. Over the months Jamie and Sue had become closer than sisters, helping each other through the missed birthdays and lonely holidays. As the anniversary of the terrorist attacks neared, Sue had agreed with Jamie. They didn't want to spend the day gathering with a group of mourners or honored in some sort of ceremony.

They wanted to spend it alone. Lost in the memory of all September 11 had cost them.

Now that the one-year date was finally there, Jamie and Sierra packed a picnic and bought a single white helium balloon. They headed to the place that Jake would've wanted to go, a place that was bound to be virtually empty that morning.

Sierra was quiet as they held hands and made their way across the sandy beach to the spot where they had come as a family so often before. It was windy as they set their things down and carried the balloon close to the shore. A seagull sounded in the distance, and Sierra looked up. She was taller now, a kindergartner whose eyes were a little less quick to sparkle and dance the way they once had. She gazed into the sky. "Mommy ... do you think Daddy can see us?"

Jamie hadn't cried as much lately. God was sustaining her, just as He'd promised. For the most part, she did her grieving in private. Jamie looked at the sky overhead and smiled. Yes, that was something else Jake was still teaching her. That it was okay to cry, okay to love deeply enough to hurt. And here, now, she felt the sting of tears as she considered her daughter's question.

"Yes, honey. I think Daddy can see us." Jamie pulled a pink marker from her jacket, pulled off the cap, and handed it to Sierra. "Go ahead, honey."

They'd planned this weeks ago, and now her daughter didn't hesitate. Jamie held the balloon for her, and Sierra hovered over it, carefully printing out each letter until she'd written a simple message across the white. "I love you, Daddy. From, Sierra."

She finished the final “a” in her name and then handed the marker back to Jamie. “Mommy, I just thought of something.”

“What?” The beach was empty, just as Jamie had pictured it. They were the only two people near the water as she looked at Sierra.

“Do you think if I give the balloon a butterfly kiss, it’ll make it all the way up to Daddy in heaven?”

Jamie bit her lip and swallowed back the lump in her throat. “Yes, baby. I think Daddy would get it that way.”

Sierra nodded and held the balloon near her face. She was about to kiss it when she stopped and looked at Jamie. Her eyes glistened with tears. “I miss him, Mommy.”

“I miss him too.”

Then—the same way she’d always done with Jake—Sierra rubbed her nose against the white surface of the balloon and held her cheek against it the way she might if her daddy was brushing his eyelashes against her. Then she turned it slightly and finally blinked her own silky eyelashes against the smooth rubber.

“Okay.” Sierra looked at Jamie. “I’m ready.”

Jamie nodded, and Sierra held the balloon string high over her head. “Jesus ... please let my daddy get this. Okay?” She waited for a single moment, then she opened her fingers and watched the balloon shoot into the sky. At first it seemed to drift in the air currents, but in only a few seconds it began moving quickly toward the heavens, and in no time at all it disappeared.

They walked back to the shore, and Jamie could almost picture the scene in Paradise. Jake standing there with Jesus, capturing the balloon as it went by and sending back butterfly kisses and enough love to last them a lifetime. Not just for Sierra, but for her.

Always for her.

Only then, with the balloon safely on its way to heaven, did Jamie pull out the piece of paper from her pocket. A copy of the last letter Jake

had ever written to her.

*Dear Sweet Jamie ...*

A teardrop fell onto it, and Jamie brushed it off. Beside her, Sierra dropped to the sand and stared at the spot in the sky where the balloon had disappeared. Jamie blinked so she could see the words once more.

*I have this feeling, deep in my heart, that something's about to change for me and you. Maybe it's your questions about church or the way you seem to hang on to Sierra's Bible stories a little bit longer these days. Whatever it is, I've prayed for God to touch your heart, baby. He means everything to me, and I know that one day He'll mean everything to you too. On that day, you'll no longer have to be afraid, because you'll have God Almighty to lean on. I want you to know, honey, that when you find that precious faith, I'll be smiling bigger than you've ever seen me smile.*

Jamie stifled a sob as she looked up toward heaven again. She sniffed and ran her fingers through Sierra's golden hair. The truth was unbelievable, really. That in her search to teach a stranger how to be Jake, she'd discovered the one thing that had been her husband's single source of strength, the faith that mattered so dearly to him.

She swallowed and finished reading the letter.

*Because the thing I want even more than your love is the knowledge that we'll have eternity together. I simply can't bear the idea of being in heaven without you. I love you too much to lose you, and sometimes, Jamie, honestly it seems like you're running. Like you're too afraid to live and love and laugh the way you could. I want you to know it's okay, sweetheart. It's okay to love and it's okay to lose. Once you figure that out you can stop running ... and start truly living. The way God wants you to live. Wherever you are when you read this, honey, know that I love you. And I'm praying for you. Always and forever ... Jake.*

She folded the piece of paper and tucked it back in her pocket. Beside her Sierra stirred, and Jamie knew it was almost time to eat their picnic lunch. They'd had their moment of remembering, of marking September

11, and all they'd lost on one single Tuesday morning.

But there was one more thing she wanted to do.

Leaving Sierra there by the picnic basket, Jamie walked a little closer to the shore, closer to the water where she and Jake had played together. When she was a few feet from the surf, she slipped off her shoes and took a few more steps until her toes were wet. Wet with the same water that had splashed against her and Jake as they tore across the bay all those summer days a lifetime ago.

Then she lifted her face toward heaven and narrowed her eyes, willing herself to see him as he was now, watching her, praying for her. The words she wanted to say to him, she would say in her heart ... where the echo of them was bound to reach him even as far away as heaven. *Hello, Jake ... it's me.* She paused, searching the sky. *I believe now ... and I've stopped running. Isn't it amazing? How God answered your prayer?* A wind gust brushed over Jamie, and she closed her eyes. *I miss you, baby. Every day, every minute.* Her tears felt cool on her cheek, but she smiled despite them. *Save me a place, will you, Jake? Because one of these days we'll be together again.*

She opened her eyes, and in that moment, she didn't have to wonder what Jake was doing, how he would look if she could see him now on the streets of heaven. She could see him as surely as she could see the clear blue sky. As easily as if he were standing in front of her.

The moment passed and Jamie returned to Sierra. They shared their picnic, and after an hour they packed up and left. Before they piled into the van, Sierra stopped and stared up at the sky. "Mommy ..."

"Yes, honey."

"You know when you went and stuck your feet in the water before lunch?" She shifted her gaze to Jamie.

"Yes, baby." Jamie set the picnic basket on the backseat and came up alongside her daughter. "I remember."

"Well, for a minute I thought I could see Daddy in the sky."



Jamie sucked in a quick breath. “Really?”

“Mhmm.” Sierra looked back at the expanse of blue overhead. Her eyes were serious, but less sad than before.

“What was he doing?” Jamie hugged Sierra's shoulders as the child turned and met her eyes.

“The most wonderful thing, Mommy.” Sierra's eyes sparkled. “He was smiling.”

## Ses-en-dertig

11 September 2002

Dis 'n jaar sedert die terroriste-aanvalle en vinnig besig om herfs te word. Op die een of ander manier het Jamie die jaar oorleef, het sy daarin geslaag om vir die ouens by die stasie te vertel wat regtig gebeur het en die nuus aan Jake se pa oor te dra toe hy van sy vakansie af teruggekom het. Sy het haar belofte aan Eric nagekom en geweier om sy identiteit aan enigiemand bekend te maak, selfs nie aan die enkele verslaggewers wat daarin geslaag het om haar te kontak nadat 'n berig oor Jake se dood in die koerant verskyn het nie.

Hulle het sy liggaam langs dié van Larry gekry toe die oorskot van meer as 'n dosyn brandweermanne op 'n dag in die lente ontdek is. Die departement het vir hulle albei 'n behoorlike begrafnis gehou – die soort wat Jamie nie meer vrees nie. Hulle het Jake se veiligheidshelm op Sierra se spieëltafel gesit om hulle albei te help onthou dat hy in die hemel is en dat hulle eendag weer bymekaar sal wees.

In sommige opsigte is Jake se teenwoordigheid steeds tasbaar in die huis. Jamie is telkens van hom bewus wanneer sy uit sy dagboek lees. Sy is steeds besig om te ontdek hoe intens hy hulle liefgehad het, hoe kosbaar sy tyd met God en sy gesin vir hom was.

Elke nou en dan kom Jamie se pa se woorde weer by haar op. Hoe hy destyds oor sy koerant na haar gekyk het en haar daarteen gewaarsku het om haar hart op Jake te verloor. *Dis nie maklik om in die brandweer te wees nie. Die gevaar is altyd daar, Jamie, net 'n foonoproep ver.*

Uiteindelik was haar pa tog reg. Maar wat die res betref, was hy verkeerd. Sy het ontdek 'n mens is nie net op jouself aangewese nie, en godsdiens nie 'n teken van swakheid nie. Jake Bryan sal altyd die sterkste man wees wat sy ken ... so sterk dat sy soms slegs deur sy woorde, sy geloof en sy liefde staande bly. Selfs al is hy nou in die hemel.

Die Here help haar ook op ander maniere. Deur die maande het Jamie en Sue soos susters geword. Hulle ondersteun mekaar wanneer verjaarsdae herdenk word en vakansies eensaam raak. Namate die herdenking van die terroriste-

aanvalle nader kom, is hulle dit eens. Hulle wil nie die dag by 'n roubyeenkoms deurbring of tydens een of ander seremonie gehuldig word nie. Hulle wil dit alleen deurbring, alleen herdenk wat 11 September hulle alles gekos het.

Noudat die dag uiteindelik aangebreek het, pak Jamie en Sierra 'n piekniekmandjie en koop 'n wit heliumballon. Hulle wil na een van Jake se gunstelingplekke toe gaan, een wat vanoggend waarskynlik verlate sal wees.

Sierra is stil toe hulle hand aan hand oor die strand na die plek loop waar hulle as gesin so dikwels gekom het. Dis winderig toe hulle hul piekniekgoed neersit en oor die sand na die branders toe loop. 'n Seemeeu kryls in die verte en Sierra kyk op. Sy het lank geword, 'n kleuter wie se oë nie heeltemal so maklik vonkel en dans soos voorheen nie. Sy tuur op in die lug. “Dink Mamma Pappa kan ons sien?”

Jamie huil die afgelope tyd nie meer so baie nie. Die Here dra haar nes Hy belowe het. Oor die algemeen treur sy agter geslote deure. Jamie kyk op en glimlag. Ja, dis nog iets wat sy by Jake geleer het. Dis nie verkeerd om te huil nie, nie verkeerd om so lief te hê dat mens seerkry nie. En terwyl sy haar dogtertjie se vraag oordink, voel sy weer die branderigheid van trane.

“Ja, my skat. Ek dink Pappa kan ons sien.” Jamie haal 'n pienk neonpen uit haar baadjie, haal die doppie af en gee dit vir Sierra. “Hierso, my skat.”

Hulle het dit weke gelede al beplan, en haar dogtertjie aarsel nie. Jamie hou die ballon vir haar vas sodat Sierra 'n eenvoudige boodskappie op die wit rubber kan skryf. Elke letter word met groot versigtigheid aangebring: “Ek is lief vir Pappa. Van Sierra.”

Nadat sy die laaste “a” in haar naam geskryf het, gee sy die pen weer vir Jamie. “Mamma, ek het nou net aan iets gedink.”

“Wat?” Hulle is die enigste mense op die strand, nes Jamie haar dit voorgestel het.

“Sê nou ek gee vir die ballon 'n vlindersoentjie ... Dink Mamma dit sal dan tot by Pappa in die hemel vlieg?”

Jamie byt op haar lip en sluk. “Ja, liefie. Ek dink dit sal dan by Pappa uitkom.”

Sierra knik en hou die ballon voor haar gesiggie. Sy is net op die punt om dit te soen toe sy skielik weifel en na Jamie kyk. Haar oë blink van die trane. “Ek mis Pappa, Mamma.”

“Ek mis hom ook.”

Toe – nes sy altyd met Jake gedoen het – vryf Sierra haar neus teen die wit ballon en hou haar wang teen die oppervlak asof haar pa haar met sy wimpers kielie. Volgende draai sy die ballon effens en laat haar eie wimpers teen die gladde rubber fladder.

“Oukei.” Sierra kyk na Jamie. “Ek’s gereed.”

Jamie knik en Sierra hou aan die punt van die tou vas terwyl die ballon hoog bokant haar dobber. “Jesus ... laat dit asseblief tot by my pappa vlieg. Oukei?” Sy wag 'n oomblik, maak haar vingertjies oop en kyk hoe die ballon boontoe

skiet. Aanvanklik lyk dit asof die ballon deur die lugstrome meegesleur word, maar 'n paar sekondes later begin die ballon vinnig boontoe beweeg, en gou is dit net 'n spikkel.

Terwyl hulle terugstap, probeer Jamie haar die toneel in die hemel voorstel. Jake wat by Jesus staan en die ballon vang wanneer dit verbykom. Hoe hy vlindersoentjies en genoeg liefde terugstuur om hulle 'n leeftyd te hou. Nie net vir Sierra nie, maar ook vir haar.

Altyd vir haar.

Eers noudat die ballon veilig op pad hemel toe is, haal Jamie die vel papier uit haar sak. 'n Fotostaat van die laaste brief wat Jake vir haar geskryf het.

*Liefste Jamie*

'n Traan val op die brief en Jamie vee dit af. Langs haar het Sierra op die sand kom sit en kyk sy na die plek waar die ballon verdwyn het. Jamie knip haar oë sodat sy die woorde weer kan sien.

*Diep in my hart is daar 'n gevoel dat daar 'n verandering gaan kom vir my en jou. Dalk is dit jou vrae oor die kerk of dié dat jy deesdae langer met Sierra oor haar Bybelstories gesels. Hoe dit ook al sy, ek bid dat die Here jou hart sal aanraak, my lief. Hy beteken alles vir my, en ek weet dat Hy eendag ook alles vir jou sal beteken. Op daardie dag sal jy nie meer hoef bang te wees nie, want jy sal op God die Almagtige kan steun. Ek wil hê jy moet weet, my skat, dat wanneer jy daardie kosbare geloof aanneem, ek breër sal glimlag as wat jy my al ooit sien glimlag het.*

Jamie onderdruk 'n snik en kyk weer boontoe. Sy snuif en streel oor Sierra se blonde hare. Wat gebeur het, is eintlik ongelooflik. In haar soeke om 'n vreemdeling te leer hoe om Jake te wees, het sy haar man se enigste bron van krag ontdek, die geloof wat vir hom so kosbaar was.

Sy sluk en lees die res van die brief.

*Want dit wat ek selfs meer as jou liefde wil hê, is die wete dat ons tot in ewigheid bymekaar sal wees. Ek kan my nie die ewigheid sonder jou indink nie. Ek is te lief vir jou om jou te verloor, Jamie, en soms voel dit regtig asof jy op vlug is. Asof jy te bang is om te lewe en lief te hê en te lag. Ek wil hê jy moet weet dis oukei, my lief. Jy mag maar liefhê en jy mag maar verloor. Die dag as jy dit besef, kan jy ophou vlug ... en werklik begin leef. Soos God wil hê jy moet lewe. Waar jy ook al is wanneer jy hierdie brief lees, my lief, weet dat ek jou liefhet. En ek bid vir jou. Vir altyd en vir ewig ... Jake.*

Sy vou die papier op en steek dit weer in haar sak. Langs haar begin Sierra woelig raak en Jamie weet dit is amper tyd om hulle mandjie oop te maak en piekniek te hou. Hulle het hulle herdenking gehou, van Jake en 11 September en alles wat hulle een Dinsdagoggend verloor het.

Maar daar is nog een ding wat sy wil doen.

Jamie los Sierra by die piekniekmandjie en loop 'n entjie nader aan die water, nader aan die branders waar sy en Jake saam in die water baljaar het. Toe sy

'n paar treë van die branders af is, trek sy haar skoene uit en loop tot in die water. Dieselfde water wat teen haar en Jake gespat het terwyl hulle 'n leeftyd se somers gelede oor die water gejaag het.

Sy lig haar gesig na die hemel en skreef haar oë asof om hom te sien soos hy nou is, soos hy na haar kyk en vir haar bid. Die woorde wat sy vir hom wil sê, sal sy in haar hart sê ... waar die eggo daarvan hom in die hemel sal bereik. *Hallo, Jake, dis ek. Sy aarsel, haar oë soekend in die lug. Ek glo nou ... en ek het ophou vlug. Is dit nie ongelooflik nie! Hoe God jou gebed verhoor het. Sy voel die wind op haar gesig en maak haar oë toe. Ek mis jou, my liefing. Elke dag, elke minuut. Haar trane is koel op haar wange, maar sy glimlag ten spyte daarvan. Hou vir my plek, sal jy, Jake? Een van die dae gaan ons weer bymekaar wees.*

Sy maak haar oë oop en in daardie oomblik hoef sy nie te wonder wat Jake doen of hoe hy sou lyk as sy hom nou in die hemel sou sien nie. Sy sien hom net so duidelik soos sy die skoon blou lug bokant haar sien. Asof hy voor haar staan.

Nadat sy nog 'n oomblik so gestaan het, gaan sy na Sierra toe. Hulle hou piekniek en 'n uur later pak hulle op en loop terug. Voordat hulle in die motor klim, steek Sierra vas en kyk boontoe. "Mamma ..."

"Ja, my skat."

"Onthou jy toe jy jou voete in die water gestee het?" Sy kyk na Jamie.

"Ja, my liefie." Jamie sit die piekniekmandjie op die agtersitplek neer en kom staan by haar dogtertjie. "Ek onthou."

"Ek het opgekyk en ek is seker ek het Pappa in die lug gesien."

Jamie trek haar asem vinnig in. "Regtig?"

"Ja, regtig." Sierra kyk weer na die eindelose blou. Haar oë is ernstig, maar die hartseer van vroeër is minder.

"Wat het hy gedoen?" Jamie gee Sierra se skouers 'n drukkie toe die dogtertjie omdraai en in haar oë kyk.

"Die wonderlikste ding, Mamma." Sierra se ogies skitter. "Hy het geglimlag."

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

Dear Reader,

On the morning of September 11, I was getting my children ready for school, when the phone rang.

"Karen ... are you watching it?" It was my sister, Sue. Her voice was frantic.

“Watching what?” I slipped on a sweatshirt and headed downstairs with Austin in tow.

“The TV ... America's under attack.”

Her words ran together after that, and all I could do was move quickly toward the television. There I witnessed—along with most of you—the collapse of the World Trade Center south tower. By then we had my mother on the line, and for a moment none of us spoke. Finally, my mom's voice broke the silence. “What just happened?”

It's a question we're still asking ourselves, isn't it?

What crazy madness and hatred was unleashed on our world that day? And how was it possible that the evil men who planned the attack were so accurate, their aim so deadly? For a while that morning I turned the TV off and helped the kids prepare for school. We ate breakfast and packed backpacks and had our devotions the same way we would've on any other morning.

But when they were gone, I turned the television back on and watched in horror as the events of the day unfolded. By noon, the story of Jake and Jamie Bryan, Laura and Eric Michaels began to grow in my heart. It wasn't something I asked for, rather it was simply something God gave me. A story born in the ashes of the collapsed Twin Towers.

I felt about the story the same way then as I do now ... that it could've happened. That with all the wild madness and destruction that day, a story like the one that happened to these people truly could've taken place.

But that wasn't the point—not then and not now.

The point was much deeper.

We were all changed by what happened on September 11. In the days and months that followed, we grieved and got angry and came together in a way that had never happened before. We loved more easily. Some of you who are faithful readers wrote me letters saying that you'd made amends with a family member or learned to express your feelings for someone you cared about.

“I tell my father that I love him every time we talk now,” one of you wrote to me. “Life is too short ... I know that better today.”

We all do.

The lessons Eric Michaels learned while living in the shoes of Jake Bryan are lessons we would all do well to take notice of. The essential need for God in our lives, the value of faith and family and special times together. The importance of daily Bible reading. And most of all, the fact that a job will never be more important than knowing God or treasuring the smiles of our little ones before they're grown.

No promotion or job title is more important than our relationships.

There were other lessons of course, the ones Jamie Bryan learned. That we cannot run from death. Eventually, it will catch each of us, and often at an hour when we are unaware. For that reason we need to love without limit and be ready to face our Maker as long as we draw breath.

I am grateful that you journeyed the pages of *One Tuesday Morning* with me. It was a difficult story to write—especially the scenes in the south tower—and I am certain it was difficult to read. For those of you who were touched personally by the attacks on America, please know that my heart grieves with you. I have prayed that this book might be sensitive and compassionate, and that it might help you grieve, also.

Perhaps in a way you haven't done until now.

I've been asked many times—even by my own father—whether it's too soon for a story like *One Tuesday Morning*. But always I say the thing that is in my heart. As a nation we have shared our shock and our anger.

Now it is time to share our grief. And often that is best done through story. *One Tuesday Morning* was my way of grieving, and maybe ... just maybe it'll be your way too.

For those of you who've read all my novels, let me tell you that my family is doing well. My husband is enjoying his time away from coaching, a time to be with our children and lead our family into a closer walk of faith. Kelsey is a young teenager now, and our relationship with her is

sweeter than ever. Tyler still gravitates toward storytelling and drama, and the four younger boys are most easily found on a sports field. As always, we cherish your prayers ... especially for my family and my ministry of writing.

I leave you with the words of Jake Bryan—*“I’ve prayed for God to touch your heart ... He means everything to me, and I know that one day He’ll mean everything to you too. On that day, you’ll no longer have to be afraid, because you’ll have God Almighty to lean on.”*

For those of you whose faith is as strong as Jake Bryan's ... I celebrate with you the joy of knowing the peace that passes understanding. But if the tragedy of September 11 has you confused or depressed, if your questions about that day still stand in the way of your relationship with the Creator, please, find a Bible-believing church and voice your concerns. I am convinced that only then will you find out the truth about the love of God.

Though death will one day find us all, we are not without hope. For God has won the victory over death.

Remember that.

In Christ's light and love ... until next time,

Karen Kingsbury

PS ... I'd love to hear from you at my website:

[www.KarenKingsbury.com](http://www.KarenKingsbury.com)

or by emailing me at [rtbbykk@aol.com](mailto:rtbbykk@aol.com)

## Outeursbrief

Liewe Leser

Ek was besig om my kinders gereed te kry vir skool toe die telefoon op 11 September lui.

“Karen ... kyk jy?” Dit was my suster, Sue. Sy het histeries geklink.

“Kyk ek wat?” Ek het ’n trui oor my kop getrek en ondertoe gegaan, Austin soos ’n stertjie agterna.

“Televisie ... Amerika word aangeval.”

Daarna het haar woorde ineengevloei en ek het my na die televisie gehaas. Daar het ek – saam met die meeste van julle – die ineenstorting van die World Trade Center se suidelike toring gesien. Teen daardie tyd het ons my ma op die telefoon gehad en vir 'n oomblik het niemand van ons gepraat nie. Uiteindelik het my ma se stem die stilte verbreek. “Wat het nou net gebeur?”

Dis 'n vraag wat ons ons vandag nog afvra, nè?

Wat het gemaak dat soveel waansin en haat daardie dag op ons land uitgestort is? En hoe is dit moontlik dat die mense wat die aanval beplan het, so akkuraat was, hulle korreling so dodelik? Ek het die televisie vir 'n ruk afgeskakel en die kinders gehelp om gereed te maak vir skool. Ons het soos elke ander oggend onthut geëet en skooltasse ingepak en huisgodsdienste gehou.

Maar toe hulle weg is, het ek die televisie weer aangeskakel en in afgryse aanskou hoe die verskriklike gebeure ontvou. Teen twaalfuur het die verhaal van Jake en Jamie Bryan, Laura en Eric Michaels in my hart begin wortelskiet. Dit was nie iets waarvoor ek gevra het nie, eenvoudig iets wat God aan my gegee het. 'n Verhaal wat uit die as van die Twin Towers gebore is.

Ek het toe al oor hierdie verhaal gevoel soos wat ek nou voel ... dat dit wel kon gebeur het. Te midde van al die chaos en verwoesting kon 'n verhaal soos dié regtig plaasgevind het.

Maar dit was nie die punt nie – nie toe of nou nie.

Die punt het veel dieper gelê.

Ons is almal verander deur wat op 11 September gebeur het. In die daaropvolgende dae en maande het ons getreur en kwaad geword en het 'n hegte band as ooit tevore tussen ons ontstaan. Ons liefde het makliker gekom. Sommige lesers het vir my geskryf dat hulle met 'n familielid vrede gemaak het of geleer het om aan hulle gevoelens uiting te gee.

“Elke keer wanneer ek en my pa praat, sê ek dat ek vir hom lief is,” het een van hulle geskryf. “Die lewe is te kort ... ek weet dit vandag.”

Weet ons dit nie almal nie?

Die lesse wat Eric Michaels geleer het terwyl hy as Jake Bryan geleef het, is ook op my en jou van toepassing. Ons noodsaaklike behoefte aan God, die waarde van ons geloof en gesin en spesiale tye saam. Die belangrikheid van daaglikse Bybelstudie. En bowenal, die feit dat 'n werk nooit belangriker kan wees as om God te ken en ons kinders te sien lag voordat hulle groot is nie.

Geen bevordering of posisie is belangriker as ons verhoudings nie.

Daar is ook die lesse wat Jamie geleer het. Ons kan nie vir die dood weghardloop nie. Uiteindelik sal ons almal daardeur ingehaal word, en dikwels wanneer ons dit nie verwag nie. Daarom moet ons perkeloos liefhê en solank ons asemhaal, gereed wees om ons Skepper te ontmoet.

Ek is dankbaar dat jy hierdie boek saam met my geniet het. Dit was 'n moeilike verhaal om te skryf – veral die tonele in die suidelike toring – en ek is seker dit was moeilik om te lees. Vir dié van julle wat persoonlik deur die



aanvalle op Amerika geraak is, weet asseblief dat my hart na julle uitgaan. Ek het gebid dat hierdie boek sensitief en vol deernis sal wees en ook dat dit jou sal help treur.

Dalk op 'n manier wat jy nog nie gedoen het nie.

Ek is deur baie mense – insluitend my eie pa – gevra of dit nie te gou vir 'n verhaal soos hierdie is nie. Maar ek kan nie anders as om te skryf wat daar op my hart is nie. As 'n nasie het ons ons skok en ons woede gedeel.

Nou is dit tyd om ons smart te deel. En dit word dikwels die beste deur 'n verhaal gedoen. Hierdie was my manier om te rou, en dalk sal dit ook jou manier wees.

Vir dié van julle wat al my boeke gelees het, wil ek sê dat dit goed gaan met my gesin. My man geniet sy tyd weg van afrigting, 'n tyd om by ons kinders te wees en ons gesin in 'n intiemer verhouding met die Here te lei. Kelsey is nou 'n jong tiener en ons verhouding met haar is mooier as ooit. Tyler het steeds 'n voorliefde vir storievertelling en drama, en die vier jonger seuns word gedurig op die sportveld gesien. Julle gebede is baie kosbaar vir ons ... veral vir my gesin en bediening.

*Ek laat julle met Jake Bryan se woorde: “Ek bid dat die Here jou hart sal aanraak ... Hy beteken alles vir my, en ek weet dat Hy eendag ook alles vir jou sal beteken. Op daardie dag sal jy nie meer hoef bang te wees nie, want jy sal op God die Almagtige kan steun.”*

Vir dié wie se geloof so sterk soos dié van Jake Bryan s'n is ... ek juig saam met julle oor die vrede wat alle verstand te bowe gaan. Maar as jy ná die tragedie van 11 September verward of depressief is, as jou vrae oor daardie dag steeds in die pad van jou verhouding met die Skepper staan, wil ek jou aanmoedig om na 'n Woordgetroue kerk te gaan en daaroor te praat. Ek is daarvan oortuig dat jy die waarheid oor God se liefde sal ontdek.

Alhoewel almal van ons eendag moet sterf, is ons nie sonder hoop nie, want God het die oorwinning oor die dood behaal.

Onthou dit.

In Christus se lig en liefde ... tot volgende keer

Karen Kingsbury

Ns. Ek hoor graag van jou by my webtuiste

[www.KarenKingsbury.com](http://www.KarenKingsbury.com)

of stuur 'n e-pos na [rtnbykk@aol.com](mailto:rtnbykk@aol.com).

BEYOND  
TUESDAY  
MORNING

# BEYOND TUESDAY MORNING

(A song)

BY KAREN KINGSBURY

(Chorus)

Let's not move too far beyond Tuesday morning

Let's not forget all the lives that were lost

Let's not move too far beyond Tuesday morning

Remember the heroes remember the cost.

Time has moved on as time always will do

Healing has come both to me and to you.

The towers that stood now stand only at times

A memory that's fading from all of our minds.

The flag on your bumper is yellowed and frayed

It's only on Sundays we take time to pray

For families of folks who did nothing but go

To work Tuesday morning and never came home.

(Bridge)

Still they are crying and still they are trying

To understand all that America lost

Take time to remember, there is no denying

That one Tuesday morning and all that it cost.

Smile at a stranger or do a good deed

Help out a neighbor, love someone in need

Do it to honor the women and men

Who died Tuesday morning and ever since then.

Let's not move too far beyond Tuesday morning

Let's not forget all the lives that were lost

Let's not move too far beyond Tuesday morning

Remember the heroes, remember the cost.

## DEDICATED TO

Donald, my prince charming, who is forever praying for me, encouraging me, and giving me reasons to laugh. The wings are from God, but you are the wind. Every letter I receive, every life changed by the words God gives me to write, all of it is as much your ministry as mine. That's how much I rely on your love and prayers. You told me when we married that you'd always love God more than me. Ever since then I've been thanking the Lord for that truth, because the love and light you bring to me and our children could only come from heaven above. I love you, Donald. With you, life is always a dance.

Kelsey, my precious daughter, so grown-up. Sometimes I look at you and do a double take. When did that kindergartner with the poofy bangs become the beautiful fifteen-year-old with model good looks? Back then I would say, "Who made you so pretty, Kelsey?" You'd giggle and answer, "Jesus!" It's still so true today, only now, as you grow closer to Him, I see an even greater beauty. The beauty of Christ within you. I'm in awe of your choices, your high standards, your determination to keep God first in your life. High school already, Kelsey? Can you believe it? Your life is everything you dreamed about and the ride gets faster all the time. But in the quiet places of my heart you will always be my little Norm. I love you.

Tyler, my Broadway boy. Once upon a yesterday you would find whoever was home, stop what we were doing, and gather us together. Audience in place, you would sing. Song after song after song. Not regular kid songs, but songs from *Annie*, *Oklahoma*, *Les Misérables*, and *Phantom of the Opera*. We always knew you had a gift, but now we gather together

in one room *hoping* you'll sing. More people are listening, Tyler, and many more will in years to come. You are only twelve, but the gift God has given you in song and drama and writing leaves me speechless. The mother heart in me is trying to find balance between my excitement for your future and my trepidation, because one day I won't have you and Kelsey singing and dancing in the background of our lives. You are the music of our home, dear Son, and even after you grow up, I will hear your song in my memory forever. I love you, Tyler.

Sean, my sunbeam. You are ten already and I can't believe it's been almost four years since you came from Haiti to live with us. You were the first one to open up about your past, to tell us of the hard times, days when you had to fend for yourself, eating dirt to survive. But today you are the first one with a hug and a smile, looking out for other people as easily as you breathe. You are a talented reader, a devoted son, and a respectful young man. I couldn't be more proud of you. You are gifted in sports, yes, but that's not why you're the first boy picked when they form teams at recess. It's because of who you are on the inside—the kind, loving person God made you to be. I'm forever glad God led you to our family; you belonged here from the beginning. I love you, Sean.

Josh, my rough-and-tumble sweetheart. Since I met you, I've known you had an amazing gift of persuasion. There I was at the Haitian orphanage, meeting Sean and EJ for the first time, but the first one to talk was you. "I love you, Mommy," you told me, using beautiful English. Do you know that the room went silent, Josh? Forty-two children clamoring and laughing and yelling in that tiny orphanage courtyard, and all I could hear was you, a child I'd never met until that day. No question, God wanted you in our home, because you arrived on September 8, 2001. Three days later political tensions might have meant you would never come home. Isn't God amazing? At ten years old, your talents are too numerous to mention, but above all God will use that wonderful charisma to bring people to Him. Save me a seat in the front row, okay, honey? I love you,

Josh.

EJ, my wide-eyed overcomer. Like a precious, beautiful flower, you continue to unfold a little more each day, proving to everyone in your world that you are capable of great things, even at eight years old. I'm so proud of the way you hold your head high, the picture of kindness and character you present to the world. In the garden of life, you are becoming a leader, one forged by hanging onto Christ and letting Him pull you to the top. I know God has plans for all of His children, but yours gets a little clearer every day. I cherish our quiet times, when you sit beside me during devotions. Your smile makes our home so much brighter. I love you, EJ.

Austin, my six-year-old Green Beret. When God brought you safely back from infant heart surgery, I knew He had a special reason for letting you live. Now I can only dream of what He has in store. "I don't need to learn piano, Mommy. I told you...I'm going to be a Green Beret!" That and a Green Bay Packer. Oh, and the next (blond) Michael Jordan. Or maybe a champion bull rider. All that rough, tough men's town stuff, and you still cry when you think of Jesus on a cross. Talk about a heartbreaking cutie! But for now, the only broken heart is mine, because already our special babyhood days together are over. You are out of kindergarten, into full-day school like the others. But don't be surprised, little first-grader, if one morning you look up and I'm there to take you out for a special date. One more time to share lunch and give-and-go and cuddle time. Whoever said it was harder letting go of your youngest was right. Keep holding onto Jesus, Austin. I love you.

And to God Almighty, the Author of Life, who has—for now—blessed me with these.

***Donald, my prins wat altyd vir my bid,  
my aanmoedig en rede gee om te lag***

My vlerke kom van God af, maar jy is die wind. Elke brief wat ek ontvang, elke lewe wat deur die woorde verander word wat ek van God ontvang, is net soveel jou bediening as myne. Dis hoe afhanklik ek van jou liefde en gebede

is. Toe ons getrou het, het jy vir my gesê dat jy altyd liever vir die Here sal wees as vir my. Sedertdien dank ek die Here daarvoor, want die liefde en lig wat jy vir my en ons kinders bring, kan net uit die hemel kom. Ek is lief vir jou, Donald. Saam met jou is die lewe altyd 'n lied.

### ***Kelsey, my kosbare dogter***

Jy het so volwasse geword. Soms moet ek twee maal na jou kyk. Wanneer het die opvreetbare kleuter in 'n modelmooi vyftienjarige verander? Toe jy klein was, sou ek vra: "Wie het jou so mooi gemaak, Kelsey?" Jy sou giggel en antwoord: "Jesus!" Dis vandag nog net so waar, maar namate jy nader aan Hom beweeg, sien ek 'n nog groter skoonheid. Die skoonheid van Christus binne jou. Ek staan verstom oor jou keuses, jou hoë standarde, jou vasberadenheid om God eerste in jou lewe te stel. Kan jy glo jy is al op hoërskool, Kelsey? Jou lewe is alles waarvan jy gedroom het en die tempo raak al hoe vinniger. Maar in die stil plekke van my hart sal jy altyd my klein dogtertjie wees. Ek is lief vir jou.

### ***Tyler, my Broadway-kind***

As klein seuntjie sou jy almal soek wat by die huis was, ons laat ophou waarmee ons besig was en opdrag gee om te kom sit. Dan sou jy vir jou gehoor sing. Liedjie ná liedjie ná liedjie. Nie gewone kinderliedjies nie, maar nommers uit *Annie*, *Oklahoma*, *Les Misérables* en *Phantom of the Opera*. Ons het altyd geweet dat jy 'n gawe het, maar nou kom sit ons in die woonkamer en hóóp jy gaan sing. Daar is nou meer mense wat luister, Tyler, en in die jare wat kom, sal daar nog meer wees. Jy is nou eers twaalf, maar die sang-, drama- en skryftalente wat God jou gegee het, laat my sprakeloos. My moederhart soek na balans tussen my opgewondenheid én bewing oor jou toekoms, want eendag gaan jy en Kelsey nie meer in die agtergrond van ons lewe sing en dans nie. Jy is die musiek in ons huis, my liefste seun, en selfs nadat jy grootgeword het, sal ek jou vir altyd in my gedagtes hoor sing. Ek is lief vir jou, Tyler.

### ***Sean, my sonstraal***

Jy is al tien en ek kan nie glo dis al amper vier jaar sedert jy uit Haïti by ons kom bly het nie. Jy was die eerste een wat oor jou verlede gepraat het, wat ons van jou swaarkry vertel het, van 'n tyd toe jy self die mas moes opkom. Maar vandag is jy die eerste een met 'n drukkie en 'n glimlag, en altyd gereed om in ander se behoeftes te voorsien. Jy is 'n talentvolle leser, 'n toegewyde seun en 'n hofflike jongman. Ek kon nie meer trots op jou gewees het nie. Ja, jy vaar goed in sport, maar dis nie die rede waarom jou naam eerste uitgeroep word wanneer daar pouses spanne gekies word nie. Dis oor wie jy aan die binnekant

is – die goedhartige, vriendelike mens wat God jou gemaak het. Ek's so dankbaar dat God jou na ons gesin toe gelei het; jy het van die begin af hier gehoor. Ek is lief vir jou, Sean.

### ***Josh, my liefste willewragtag***

Ek het van die eerste oomblik geweet dat jy 'n besondere oortuigingsvermoë het. Ek en Pappa het na die Haïtiese kinderhuis toe gegaan om Sean en EJ vir die eerste keer te ontmoet, maar jy was die eerste enetjie wat gepraat het. “Ek is lief vir jou, Mamma,” het jy vir my gesê. Weet jy dat dit doodstil geword het, Josh? Twee-en-veertig kinders het in die kinderhuis se klein binnehof geraas en gelag en gegil, en al wat ek kon hoor, was jou stemmetjie, dié van 'n kind wat ek nog nooit ontmoet het nie. Die Here wou jou beslis in ons huis gehad het, want jy het jou opwagting op 8 September 2001 gemaak. Drie dae later sou die politieke spanning dalk beteken dat jy nooit by ons sou uitkom nie. Is die Here nie ongelooflik nie! Op tien het jy te veel talente om op te noem, maar in die eerste plek sal God jou wonderlike charisma gebruik om mense na Hom toe te trek. Hou vir my 'n plek 'n die voorste ry, sal jy? Ek is lief vir jou, Josh.

### ***EJ, my grootoog wenner***

Soos 'n kosbare, lieflike blom is jy besig om elke dag 'n bietjie verder te ontvou en aan almal te bewys waartoe jy selfs as agtjarige in staat is. Ek is so trots op die manier waarop jy die wêreld in die oë kyk, 'n toonbeeld van goedhartigheid en karakter. Die manier waarop jy aan Christus vashou en toelaat dat Hy jou tot bo trek, is besig om 'n leier van jou te maak. Ek weet dat God vir al sy kinders 'n plan het, maar joune is besig om elke dag 'n bietjie duideliker te word. Ek koester die oomblikke wanneer jy tydens huisgodsdienste langs my sit. Jou glimlag maak ons huis soveel helderder. Ek is lief vir jou, EJ.

### ***Austin, my sesjarige vegttertjie***

Toe jy as piepklein babatjie jou opehartoperasie oorleef het, het ek geweet dat God jou met 'n baie spesiale rede laat lewe het. Nou kan ek maar net droom oor dit wat Hy vir jou beplan. “Ek hoef nie klavierlesse te neem nie, Mamma. Ek sê mos ... ek gaan 'n Green Beret word!” 'n Green Beret en die volgende (blonde) Michael Jordan. Of dalk 'n rodeo-kampioen. Al hierdie rowwe, ruwe mannegoed, en jy huil steeds wanneer jy aan Jesus se kruisiging dink. Praat van 'n klein hartebreker. Maar voorlopig is my hart die enigste gebroke een, want jy het jou kleuterskoene ontgroeï en gaan nou saam met die ander kinders groot skool toe. Moenie verbaas wees as jy een oggend opkyk en ek jou vir 'n spesiale uitstappie wegsteel nie! Wie ook al gesê het dat dit



moeiliker is om jou jongste te laat gaan, was reg. Hou vas aan Jesus, Austin. Ek is lief vir jou.

***En aan God die Almagtige, die Outeur van die lewe, die Een wat my met hulle almal geseën het.***

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

As always, when I bring my heart's thoughts and dreams to the computer keyboard, it's not without the help of a host of people.

In the writing of *Beyond Tuesday Morning*, I must first thank the people of St. Paul's Chapel. It is every bit the mighty mission I tried to make it in the fictional story that plays out on the following pages. The volunteers at St. Paul's continue to play a role in a healing that is far from complete. I learned much from my time at St. Paul's, talking to volunteers and studying the mementos and memorabilia there.

While the rest of us watched in horror that terrible Tuesday morning as the Twin Towers collapsed, we eventually got on with our lives. Not so for many of the people in Manhattan—especially for hundreds of firefighters and their families. Because of that, I am grateful to each of you who still devotes his or her time to the healing process at Ground Zero.

Thanks also to the information office of the fire department of New York. With the cooperation of this office, we were able to send a thousand copies of *One Tuesday Morning*, the first book in this set, to the FDNY—four books per station. The letters I've received from New York City firefighters have often left me in tears.

They tell me they are desperate for light and hope, that the pain lives on every day. And that, in many cases, reading *One Tuesday Morning* gave them a reason to believe again, a reason to turn back to God and their families after being consumed by pain, grief—and even hatred.

I thank each one of you who wrote those letters, because it was your story that I had to complete in this book. Not literally, of course. *Beyond*

*Tuesday Morning* is fictional, and any similarity to real life people or situations is purely coincidental. But I pray that the hurting people in New York find hope the way Jamie Bryan does in this sequel.

The fact is, with God, the story need not end in grief and despair but with *life*. I pray you'll find that message in this book.

Also thanks to my brilliant editor, Karen Ball, and to marketing expert Sue Brower, and to all my friends at Zondervan Publishing. Thank you for taking my idea about a story of life springing from the ashes of September 11 and helping it become what it is today. Also, a thanks to Cheryl Orefice who listened while I brainstormed the possibilities of *Beyond Tuesday Morning*.

A special thanks to my mother, Anne Kingsbury, who is also my assistant. You have a mind like mine and a heart for the ministry these books have become. Your presence in my life is heaven sent. I love you, Mom. I couldn't do my job without you. And to my father, Ted, who continues to be my greatest cheerleader. Dad, remember when I was writing poetry as a teenager, and you told me I could do anything with God's help? Even becoming an author? Well, I believed you—and look what God has done! I love you more every day.

Thanks also to my agent, Rick Christian. Rick, you pray for me and push me and protect me in ways that go beyond my highest expectations, proving I'm the most blessed writer of all. I stand amazed at your talents—and grateful that beyond anything in the publishing world, you desire God's will for my life, that I serve Him, that I have time for my beloved husband and children, and that I listen to His call. How amazing it is to have found you!

When it comes to crunch time, and I find myself pouring out my heart on deadline, lots of people come together to fill in the gaps. With six kids, it would be impossible otherwise. And so a warm and heartfelt thanks to my husband Donald, my kids—who don't mind having tuna sandwiches for a week on end, my sister Tricia, my parents again, and my good friends

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And a thanks to my extended family, and to my friends Randy and Vicky and Lila Graves, Bobbi and Tika Terret, John and Melinda Chapman, Mark and Marilyn Atteberry, Kathy Santschi, and my many friends at New Heights Church, Christian Youth Theater, and at the local schools. Your encouragement, love, and support are a constant source of strength.

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Finally, thanks to God Almighty. He is the reason any of this is possible. The words are His, the ideas are His, the gift is His. I pray I might remain obedient to all He is asking of me in this season of writing. Thank You, God...thank You.

## **Bedankings**

Wanneer ek my gedagtes en drome na die rekenaar se sleutelbord bring, is dit soos altyd met die hulp van 'n hele klomp mense.

Rakende die skryf van hierdie verhaal moet ek eerstens die mense van St. Paul's Chapel bedank. In die werklike lewe is dit dieselfde kragtige bediening

wat ek in hierdie boek uitgebeeld het. Die vrywilligers by St. Paul's speel steeds 'n rol in die volgehoue genesingsproses. Ek het baie uit my gesprekke met die vrywilligers by St. Paul's en die gedenkwaardighede in die kapel self geleer.

Die meeste mense wat daardie verskriklike Dinsdagoggend in afgryse na die ineenstorting van die Twin Towers gekyk het, het uiteindelik weer met hulle lewe voortgegaan. Vir baie van die mense in Manhattan, veral die honderde brandweermanne en hulle gesinne, was dit egter nie die geval nie. Daarom sê ek dankie aan elkeen van julle wat steeds sy of haar tyd aan die genesingsproses by Ground Zero afstaan.

Dankie ook aan die inligtingskantoor van die New Yorkse brandweer. In samewerking met hulle kon ons duisend eksemplare van *One Tuesday Morning*, die eerste boek in hierdie reeks, na elke brandweerstasie in New York stuur – vier boeke per stasie. Die briewe wat ek van die New Yorkse brandweermanne ontvang het, het my dikwels in tranes gehad.

Hulle skryf dat hulle 'n desperate behoefte het aan lig en hoop, dat hulle daagliks met die pyn van daardie dag saamleef. En in baie gevalle het die lees van *One Tuesday Morning* hulle 'n rede gegee om weer te glo, 'n rede om weer na God en hulle gesinne terug te keer nadat hulle deur pyn, smart, en selfs haat verteer is.

Dankie aan elkeen van julle wat vir my geskryf het, want dis julle verhale wat ek in hierdie boek moes voltooi. Nie letterlik nie, natuurlik. Hierdie verhaal is fiktief, en enige ooreenkomste met werklike mense of situasies is bloot toevallig. Maar ek bid dat die gebroke mense in New York by dieselfde hoop sal uitkom wat Jamie Bryan in hierdie opvolg ontdek het.

Die feit is, saam met God hoef die uiteinde van die verhaal nie smart en desperaatheid te wees nie, maar *lewe*. Ek bid dat hierdie boek daardie boodskap by jou sal tuisbring.

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besef ek dat ek 'n uiters geseënde skrywer is. Ek staan verstom oor jou talente; jou grootste begeerte as uitgewer is dat God se wil in my lewe geskied, dat ek Hom dien, dat ek genoeg tyd vir my man en kinders het en dat ek na God se roepstem luister. Ek is ongelooflik dankbaar dat ek jou gevind het!

Wanneer 'n sperdatum naderkom, is daar baie mense wat saamspan om die leemtes te vul. Met ses kinders sou dit andersins nie moontlik gewees het nie. 'n Warm en opregte dankie aan my man, Donald, my kinders – wat nie omgee om die hele week tunatoebroodjies te eet nie – my suster Tricia, my ouers en my goeie vriende Cindy Weil, die Schmidt-gesin, die Chapmans, Thayne Guymon en Aaron Hisel (wat almal by geleentheid in my plek saam met Austin na paddas gesoek het!).

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# Chapter ONE

She was surviving; the commute proved that much.

Jamie Bryan took her position at the far end of the Staten Island Ferry, pressed her body against the railing, eyes on the place where the Twin Towers once stood. She could face it now, every day if she had to. The terrorist attacks had happened, the World Trade Center had collapsed, and the only man she'd ever loved had gone down with them.

Late fall was warmer than usual, and the breeze across the water washed over Jamie's face. If she could do this—if she could make this journey three times a week while seven-year-old Sierra was at school—then she could get through another long, dark night. She could face the empty place in the bed beside her, face the longing for the man who had been her best friend, the one she'd fallen for when she was only a girl.

If she could do this, she could do anything.

Jamie looked at her watch. Nine-fifteen, right on schedule. Three times a week the routine was the same. From Staten Island across the harbor on the ferry, up through the park, past the brick walls that after September 11 were plastered with pictures of missing people, into the heart of lower Manhattan's financial district, past the cavernous crater where the Twin Towers had stood, to St. Paul's. The little church was a strangely out-of-place stone chapel with a century-old cemetery just thirty yards from the pit. A chapel that, for months after the attacks, had been a café, a hospital, a meeting place, a counseling office, a refuge, a haven to firefighters and police officers and rescue workers and volunteers, a place to pray and be prayed for. A place that pointed people to God.

All the things a church should be.

Never mind the plans for a new World Trade Center, or the city's designs for an official memorial. Never mind the tourists gathered at the ten-foot chain-link fence around the pit or the throngs gawking at the pictorial timeline pinned along the top of the fence—photos of the Twin

Towers' inception and creation and place in history. Souvenir picture books might be sold around the perimeter of the pit, but only one place gave people a true taste of what had happened that awful day.

St. Paul's.

The ferry docked, and Jamie was one of the first off. When it was raining or snowing she took a cab, but today she walked. Streets in lower Manhattan teemed as they always had, but there was something different about the people. It didn't matter how many years passed, how many anniversaries of the attacks came and went.

The people of New York City would never be the same.

Yes, they were busy, still driven to climb the ladders or make a name for themselves in New York City. But for the most part they were more likely to make eye contact, and when they did, they were more likely to smile or nod or give some sort of sign that the bond was still there, that a city couldn't go through something like New Yorkers went through September 11 and not be changed forever.

Jamie breathed in hard through her nose and savored the sweet mix of seawater and city air. Jake would've liked this, the way she was facing the situation, allowing her pain to work for good in the lives of others. She had lived in paralyzing fear for so long, but now—now that she'd lost Jake—she could face anything. Not in her own strength, but because Jake's faith lived deep within her.

Funny how she'd come to be a volunteer at St. Paul's.

It was Captain Hisel's idea. He'd been Jake's boss, his mentor. He'd found Jake—or the man he *thought* was Jake—in the aftermath of the collapse of the towers. Of course the man hadn't been Jake at all but Eric Michaels, a Los Angeles businessman who came into Jamie's life by mistake. A man she believed was her husband for three agonizing months.

A man who'd gone home to his family three years ago without looking back. And rightfully so. Jamie had told only a few people the details of that tender, tragic time. Captain Hisel was one of them.

The captain became a special friend in the months and years since the terrorist attacks. At first they shared an occasional Sunday dinner, but since shortly after the first anniversary of the attacks they were together at least twice a week, volunteering at St. Paul's and sharing lunch or dinner. He was Aaron to her now, and the two of them had everything in common.

Or at least it seemed that way.

Jamie turned a corner and saw the old cemetery. It was clean now, free of the ash and debris that had gathered around the tombstones and remained there for months after the attacks. The island of Manhattan was a different place since that terrible Tuesday morning, more vulnerable, less cocksure. But warmer too. Stronger. For most of America, time might've dimmed the horror of what happened to New York City when the Twin Towers fell. But those who were there would always remember. The connection it gave Manhattan residents was undeniable.

A few feet in front of her, a street vendor nodded. "Nice day."

"Yes, it is." Jamie smiled and kept walking.

See. There it was again. Before September 11, a vendor wouldn't have made eye contact unless he wanted to push a hot dog or a bag of caramelized almonds. Now? Now the man was familiar. She saw him every time she volunteered at St. Paul's; he probably knew where she was headed, what she was doing.

Everyone in lower Manhattan knew about St. Paul's.

Jamie crossed the street, stopped, and turned—same as she did every day. Before she could enter St. Paul's Chapel, before she could open her heart to the picture-taking tourists and the quietly grieving regulars who couldn't stay away, she had to see for herself that the towers were really gone. It was part of the ritual. She had to look across the street at the grotesque gargantuan hole where the buildings once stood, had to remind herself why she was here and what she was doing, that terrorists really had flown airplanes into the World Trade Center and obliterated the buildings—and two thousand lives.



Because Jake had been one of those people, coming to St. Paul's kept him alive in some ways. Being at Ground Zero, helping out...that was something Jake would've done. It was the very thing he'd been doing when he died.

Jamie let her gaze wander up into the empty sky, searching unseen floors and windows. Had he been on the way up—he and his best schoolboy buddy, Larry—trying to reach victims at the top? Or had he been partway down? She narrowed her eyes. If only God would give her a sign, so she would know exactly where to look.

She blinked and the invisible towers faded. Tears welled in her heart, and she closed her eyes. *Breathe, Jamie. You can do this. God, help me do this.*

A deep breath in through her nose. Exhale...slow and steady. *God... help me.*

*My strength is sufficient for you, daughter.*

She often prayed at this stage of the routine, and almost as often she felt God whispering to her, coaxing her, helping her along as a father might help his little girl. The way Jake had helped Sierra.

The quiet murmurs in the most hurting part of her soul were enough. Enough to give her strength and desire and determination to move ahead, to go through the doors of St. Paul's and do her part to keep the vigil for all she lost more than three years ago.

She turned her back to the pit and took determined steps beside the black wrought iron fence bordering the cemetery, around the corner to the small courtyard at the front of the chapel. The hallowed feeling always hit her here, on the cobbled steps of the little church. How many firefighters had entered here in the months after the attacks, firemen looking for food or comfort or a shoulder to cry on? How many had passed through it since the building had reopened, looking for hope or answers or a reason to grieve the tragedy even if it had never touched them personally?

Just inside the doors, Jamie turned to the left and stopped. There,

scattered over a corner table, was a ragtag display of hundreds of items: yellowed photos, keepsakes, and letters written to victims of the attacks. She scanned the table, saving his picture for last. Beneath the photo of a balding man holding a newborn baby, the grin on his face ear to ear: *Joe, we're still waiting for you to come home...* Scribbled atop a wedding photo: *You were everything to me, Cecile; you still are...* Tacked to the side of a wallet-sized picture of a young FDNY guy: *Your ladder boys still take the field every now and then but it's not the same without you. Yesterday Saul hit a homer and every one of us looked up. Are you there?*

Every time Jamie did this, her eyes found different letters, different snippets of pain and aching loss scattered across the display. But always she ended in the same place. At Jake's picture and the letter written by their daughter, Sierra.

Jake was so handsome, his eyes brilliant blue even in the poorly lit corner. *Jake...I'm here, Jake.* When there weren't too many people working their way into the building, she could stand there longer than usual. This was one of those days. Her eyes locked on her husband's, and for a moment he was there again, standing before her, smiling at her, holding his arms out to her.

Her fingers moved toward the picture, brushing the feathery photo paper as if it were Jake's face, his skin.

"Jake..."

For the briefest moment she was sure she could hear him. *Jamie, I'm not gone, I'm here. Come see for yourself.*

She drew her hand back and wrapped her arms around her waist. People had caught her touching his picture before; it made the volunteer coordinators nervous. As if maybe she wasn't ready to comfort others when she was still so far from healed herself.

She didn't mean to touch the photo; it just happened. Something about his eyes in the picture made him seem larger than life, the way he'd been before...

Before.

That was it, wasn't it? Life before September 11, and life after it. Two completely different lives. There were times when she thought she could hear Jake. His voice still rang in the corridors of her heart, the way it always would. Tears blurred her eyes and she gritted her teeth. She wouldn't break down here, not now. On his birthday or their anniversary, maybe. On the anniversary of September 11, of course. But if she was going to keep Jake's memory alive, she couldn't break down every time she volunteered.

She glanced at the letter, the one Sierra had written a few weeks ago on the third anniversary of the attack. Her daughter's other letters were safe in a scrapbook, a keepsake for Sierra so she wouldn't forget the closeness she'd shared with Jake. Every few months Sierra wrote a new note, and that one would replace the old one on the display table. The letter showed that Sierra still didn't know how her father had died. As far as she knew, her daddy didn't die on September 11 but three months later. In a fire, trying to save people trapped inside. It was a half-truth; the best Jamie could do under the circumstances.

She just hadn't known how to tell Sierra that the man who'd been living with them for three months wasn't really her father but a stranger. In the three years since Eric Michaels left them, Jamie had yet to figure out a way to talk about the subject. For that matter, Sierra still had a picture of herself standing next to Eric. Once, a little more than a year ago, Jamie had tried to take it down. She could still see the look on her daughter's face when she came running down the stairs into the kitchen, her eyes red with tears.

"My picture of me and Daddy is gone!"

Jamie felt awful about that one. She'd gone up with Sierra and pretended to look for it. That night while her daughter slept, Jamie took it from the closet where she'd hidden it and placed it on Sierra's dresser again. Right next to Jake's fire helmet.

Two other times she'd tried to replace it with other photos, pictures that actually were of Sierra and Jake.

"The one after Daddy got hurt is too sad," she'd tell Sierra. "Let's put it away, okay?"

But Sierra would move the other photos to her bookshelves, keeping the one of her and Eric on her dresser. "That's the last picture of me and Daddy. I want it there forever. Please, Mommy, don't make me move it."

The memory lifted.

Sierra had never even been to St. Paul's; she didn't know that's where her mother volunteered her time. The whole story about Eric and his time with them was getting harder to stand by. Deception wasn't Jamie's style, and lately she'd been feeling that one day soon she'd have to tell Sierra the truth. Her daughter deserved that much.

Jamie worked her gaze along her daughter's neat handwriting and read the letter for the hundredth time.

*Dear Daddy, how are you doing up in heven? I'm doing good down here; I'm in second grade, and Mommy says I'm smartst in my class. But I'm not that smart cuz I have some things I don't know. Like how come you had to go to heven when I need you so much rite here? How come you had to help those peple in that fire? Why culdnt they wok out by themselves. Somtimes I clos my eys and I remember how you lookd. Somtimes I remember budrfly kisses. But somtimes I forget. I love you. Sierra.*

Sometimes she forgets.

That was the hardest part of all lately. The chapel entrance was empty, and Jamie closed her eyes. *God, don't let either of us forget Jake. He's with You, still alive somewhere in Paradise with You. But until we can all be together again, help Sierra remember him, God. Please. Help her—*

Someone tapped her shoulder, and she spun around, her breath in her throat. "Aaron!" She stepped back from the display table and forced a smile. "Hi."

“Hey.” He backed up toward the wooden pews that filled the center of the chapel. “Someone wants to—”

Aaron looked past her at the picture of Jake, as if he’d only just realized the reason why she was standing there. For a long while he said nothing, then he looked at her, his eyes filled with a familiar depth. “I’m sorry. I didn’t realize you were—”

“No, it’s okay.” She slipped her hands in the pockets of her sweater. “I was reading Sierra’s letter. It’s been three years; she’s forgetting Jake.”

Aaron bit his lip and let his gaze fall to the floor.

“It was bound to happen.” She gave a slight shrug. The corners of her mouth lifted some, but the smile stopped there. “She was only four when he died.”

“I know.” A respectful quiet fell between them. “Still hard to believe he’s gone.”

“Yes.” Once more she glanced at Jake’s picture. “Still hard to believe.”

She felt strangely awkward, the way she had back in high school when some boy other than Jake smiled at her or flirted with her. But Aaron wasn’t flirting with her, and she wasn’t in high school...and Jake was dead.

But not really; not when he lived in her memory as fully as he’d once lived in her home.

No wonder the strange feeling, the hint of guilt at being caught looking at the picture of her husband. She’d felt this way before on occasion, though only when she was with Aaron. Even so, she refused to make too much of her emotions. They were bound to be all over the board, even if she and Aaron were only friends.

He nodded his head toward the center of the chapel. “There’s a lady in the front pew; she could use your help. Husband was a cop, died in the collapse.” His eyes met hers and held. Concern shone through, and the awkward feeling disappeared. “You ready?”

“Ready.” Jamie fell in beside him and headed down one of the pews

toward the other side of the chapel. She wanted to glance once more at Jake's picture, but she didn't.

He pointed to a blonde woman in the front row. "You got it?"

Jamie nodded. "What about you?"

"Over there." He glanced toward the back of the chapel. The memorial tables framed the perimeter of the room. A couple in their seventies stood near the back wall. "Tourists. Lots of questions."

They shared a knowing look—this was what they did at St. Paul's: being there for the people who came through the doors, whatever their reason—then they turned and went their separate ways.

With slow, hushed steps, Jamie came alongside the blonde woman. Many of the widows who visited St. Paul's had been there before, but this one wasn't familiar. Jamie sat down and waited until the woman looked at her.

"Hi, I'm Jamie Bryan; I'm a volunteer."

The woman's eyes were red and swollen, and though she opened her mouth, no words came. She lowered her head into her hands, and a few quiet sobs worked their way through her body.

Jamie put her hand on the woman's back. The woman was in her late forties, Jamie guessed, heavyset with an ocean of pain welling within her. When the woman's tears subsided, she sniffed and found Jamie's eyes. "Does...the pain ever go away?"

This was the hard part. Jamie was here at St. Paul's for one reason: to offer hope to those devastated by the losses of September 11. The problem was just what Martha White, the volunteer coordinator, had warned her from the beginning. She couldn't work through her own pain by giving advice to people about theirs.

"I'm fine," she'd told Martha. "I'm working through it, but I'm fine at St. Paul's."

Martha looked doubtful. "You tell me if it's too much." She wagged a motherly finger at Jamie. "You're a victim same as everyone else."

The coordinator's words came back to Jamie now, and she swallowed hard. What had the weeping woman just asked her? Did the pain ever go away?

Jamie looked from the woman to the front of the church, the place where the old ornate cross stood like an anchor. Without taking her eyes from it, Jamie gave a slow shake of her head. "No. The pain doesn't go away." She turned back to the woman. "But God helps us learn how to live with it."

Another wave of tears hit the woman. Her face contorted, and she pinched the bridge of her nose. "It still...feels like September 12. Sometimes I think it always will."

A strength rose from within Jamie. Every time she'd been needed in a situation like this one, God had delivered. Every time. She turned so she could see the woman better. "Tell me about your husband."

"He was a cop." She lifted one shoulder and ran the back of her hands beneath her eyes. "Everyone's always talking about the firemen, but the cops took a hit too."

Jamie had heard this before from the wives of other police officers. "Have you been around the chapel yet?"

"I just started when..." She held her breath, probably stifling another wave of sobs.

"It's okay to cry."

"Thank you." The woman's shoulders shook again. "This chapel... That's why I'm crying." She searched Jamie's eyes. "I didn't think anyone cared until I came here, and now..."

"Now you know the truth."

"Yes." The woman grabbed a quick breath and stared at a poster on a wall overhead. *Oklahoma Cares*. Beneath the banner title were hundreds of handprints from children who had experienced the bombing of the Murrah Building in Oklahoma City. One line read, *We love our police!* "I didn't come before because I didn't want to be angry at anyone. But this is where

I need to be; I should've come a hundred times by now."

"I'm Jamie." She held out her hand, and the woman across from her took it. "What's your name?"

"Cindy Grammar." The woman allowed the hint of a smile. "Is it just me, or do you feel something here?"

"I feel it. Everyone who comes inside feels it."

"It's the only place where the memory of all those people still lives. You know, as a group."

"Exactly." Jamie folded her hands in her lap and looked around the chapel at the banners, then at the memorabilia lining the walls—items collected from the edge of the pit or left near the chapel steps. One day the city would have an official memorial to the victims of September 11. But for now, those two thousand people were remembered with grace and love at St. Paul's.

"This city loved my Bill. I could sense that the minute I walked in here."

"You're right." Jamie gave Cindy's hand a gentle squeeze. "And no one will forget what he did that day. He was a hero, Cindy. Same as the firefighters."

The conversation continued for nearly an hour before the woman felt ready to finish making her way around the inside of the building. By then her eyes were dry and she had shared the story of how she'd met her husband, how much they'd loved each other. Jamie knew the names of the woman's two sons, and the fact that they both played high school football.

"Thanks, Jamie." The woman's expression was still filled with sorrow, but now it was also tinged with gratitude and peace. "I haven't felt this good in months."

Jamie's heart soared. Her job was to bring hope to the hopeless, and to do it in Jake's name. Again and again and again. She took Cindy's hands again. "Let's pray, okay?"

The woman squirmed. "I'm...I'm not sure about God, Jamie."



“That’s okay.” Jamie’s smile came from her heart, from the place that understood God the way Jake had always wanted her to understand. “God’s sure about you.”

“Really?” Doubt colored Cindy’s eyes.

“Really. We don’t have to pray; just let me know.” Jamie bit her lip, waiting.

“I want to.” The woman knit her brow together. “I don’t know what to say.”

Jamie gave the woman’s hand a gentle squeeze. “I’ll say it.” She bowed her head and began, the way she had dozens of times over the past two years. “God, we come to You because You know all things. You are sovereign and mighty and You care about us deeply. Help Cindy believe in You, Lord. Help her to understand that You hold a flashlight as we walk through the valley of the shadow of death. And let her find new life in You. In Jesus’ name, amen.”

Jamie opened her eyes.

A fresh sort of peace filled Cindy’s face. She leaned closer and hugged Jamie. “I’ll be back.”

Jamie smiled. “I know.”

The woman stood and headed for the outer rim of the chapel with a promise to return some day so that maybe the two could talk—and even pray again.

When she was finally alone, Jamie’s hands trembled. Her legs were stiff from sitting for so long. Meetings like that were emotionally draining, and Jamie wanted water before she talked to anyone else.

But before she could reach the stairs, another woman approached her, four young teenage girls in tow, each holding a notebook. “Hi, maybe you could help us.”

“Of course.” Jamie gave the group her full attention. “What would you like to know?”

“We’re a homeschool group and—” she looked at the girls—“each of

the students has a list of questions for you. They want to know how St. Paul's was instrumental in serving the people who cleaned up the pile of debris after the towers collapsed."

"Okay." Jamie smiled, but something grated against her heart. The pile of debris? Jake had been in that pile. It was okay for *her* to call it that, but these people were...they were on a quest for details, like so many reporters. She ignored her irritation and directed the group to the nearest pew. "Let's sit here and we can talk."

School groups were common, and always needed help from volunteers. They wanted to know how many hundreds of gallons of water were given out—more than four thousand; how many different types of services were offered free to the work crew—podiatry, massage therapy, counseling, chiropractic care, nursing care, and optometry among others; and what sort of impact did St. Paul's and its volunteers have on the work crew—a dramatic one.

The questions continued, but they weren't out of line. By the time Jamie was finished talking with the group, she regretted her first impression. The girls were well-mannered, the parent sensitive to the information Jamie shared. It was nearly noon when the group went on their way. Jamie scanned the pews first, and then the perimeter of the chapel. She was thirsty, but the visitors came first. The week she trained as a volunteer Martha had made that clear.

"Look for fires to put out." A tiny woman with a big mouth and a heart as vast as the Grand Canyon, Martha was particularly serious about this detail. "Look for the people breaking down and weeping, the ones sitting by themselves in a pew. Those are the ones you should approach. Just so they know you're there."

No fires at the moment.

Aaron was across the room, talking to another pair of tourists. At least his conversations looked less intense than the one she'd had with Cindy. She trudged up the stairs to the volunteers' break room. An open case of

water bottles sat on the table; she took one and twisted off the lid. Chairs lined the area, but she was tired of sitting. She leaned against the stone wall and looked up at the aged stained glass.

Funny, the way Martha had said it. *Fires to put out*. It was one more way Jamie was keeping Jake's memory alive. No, she didn't deal with flames and fire hoses. But she was putting out fires all the same. He would've been proud of her.

In fact, if he'd survived, he'd be right here at St. Paul's with her. All the more reason to volunteer as long as the chapel was open. It gave her purpose, and in that sense it wasn't only a way to keep Jake's memory, his sacrifice, alive.

It was a way to keep herself alive too.

## Een

Sy oorleef; die gereelde veerbootritte is bewys daarvan.

Jamie Bryan gaan staan teen die verste reling van die Staten Island Ferry, haar oë op die plek waar die Twin Towers eens gestaan het. Sy hoef nie meer daarvan weg te skram nie en kan nou elke dag daarna kyk as dit moet. Die terroriste-aanvalle het plaasgevind, die World Trade Center het ineengestort, en die enigste man wat sy ooit liefgehad het, het dit nie oorleef nie.

Die laatherfs is warmer as gewoonlik en die briesie oor die water liefkoos Jamie se gesig. As sy hierin kan slaag – as sy hierdie rit drie maal 'n week kan onderneem terwyl die sewejarige Jamie by die skool is – kan sy deur nog 'n lang, donker nag kom. Sy sal die leë plek langs haar in die bed kan verduur, die verlange na die man wat haar beste vriend was, op wie sy verlief geraak het toe sy 'n dogtertjie was.

As sy dit kan doen, kan sy enigiets doen.

Jamie kyk op haar horlosie. Dis kwart oor nege, presies volgens skedule.

Dis drie maal per week se roetine. Met die veerboot van Staten Island oor die hawe, dan deur die park, verby die baksteenmure wat ná 11 September met foto's van vermiste persone gepleister was, tot in die hartjie van Manhattan se finansiële distrik, verby die gapende krater waar die Twin Towers gestaan het, tot by St. Paul's. Die klein kerkie is 'n klipkapel met 'n begraafplaas, en lyk vreemd ontuis net dertig meter van die ramptoneel af. 'n Kapel wat in die maande ná die aanval 'n kosdepot geword het, sowel as 'n hospitaal, 'n vergaderplek, 'n beradingskantoor, 'n skuilplek, 'n toevlug vir brandweer- en polisiemanne en reddingswerkers en vrywilligers, 'n plek om te bid en te vra

vir gebed. 'n Plek wat mense na die Here heenwys.

Alles wat 'n kerk behoort te wees.

Daar is planne vir 'n nuwe World Trade Center en die munisipaliteit wil 'n amptelike gedenkteken oprig. Daar is dosyne toeriste wat voor die heining om Ground Zero saamdrom en skares wat die geïllustreerde tydlyn bestudeer wat bo teen die heining aangebring is – foto's van die Twin Towers se ontstaan, oprigting en plek in die geskiedenis. Daar is prenteboeke waarin die gebeure uitgebeeld word en wat as aandenkings verkoop word. Maar daar is net een plek wat mense 'n ware kykie gee op wat daardie verskriklike dag gebeur het. St. Paul's.

Jamie is een van die eerstes wat aan wal gaan toe die veerboot vasmeer. Wanneer dit reën of sneeu, neem sy 'n taxi, maar vandag stap sy. Manhattan se strate is nie stiller sedert die aanvalle nie, maar daar is iets anders aan die mense. Maak nie saak hoeveel jare verloop, hoeveel herdenkings van die aanval kom en gaan nie.

Die mense van New York sal nooit weer dieselfde wees nie.

Ja, hulle is besig, steeds gedrewe om bo uit te kom of vir hulleself naam te maak in New York. Maar oor die algemeen is hulle meer geneig om oogkontak te maak, en indien wel, meer geneig om te glimlag of te knik of die een of ander blyk te gee dat die band steeds daar is, dat 'n stad nie iets soos 11 September kan deurmaak sonder om blywend te verander nie.

Jamie asem die sout seelug gemeng met dié van die stad diep in. Jake sou hiervan gehou het, haar hantering van die situasie, die manier waarop sy haar pyn ten goede vir ander mense aanwend. Sy het so lank in verlamme vrees gelewe, maar nou – nou dat sy Jake verloor het – sien sy vir enigiets kans. Nie deur haar eie krag nie, maar omdat Jake se geloof diep in haar lewe.

Snaaks hoe sy 'n vrywilliger by St. Paul's geword het.

Dit was kaptein Hisel se idee. Hy was Jake se baas, sy mentor. Hy het Jake – of die man wat hy *gedink* het was Jake – na afloop van die ineenstorting van die torings opgespoor. Dit sou later blyk dat die man nie Jake was nie, maar Eric Michaels, 'n sakeman van Los Angeles wat per ongeluk in Jamie se lewe gekom het. Sy het drie folterende maande lank geglo dat hy haar man was.

Eric het drie jaar gelede na sy gesin toe teruggegaan en hulle het nooit weer kontak gehad nie. En met reg. Jamie het die besonderhede van daardie teer, tragiese tyd met net 'n paar mense gedeel. Kaptein Hisel was een van hulle.

In die maande en jare sedert die aanval het die kaptein 'n kosbare vriend geword. Aanvanklik het hulle af en toe Sondae saam geëet, maar ná die eerste herdenking van die aanvalle het hulle mekaar minstens twee maal per week gesien wanneer hulle by St. Paul's vrywilligerswerk doen of vir middagete of aandete ontmoet. Hy het *Aaron* vir haar geword, en hulle het alles in gemeen.

Dis altans hoe dit voel.

Nadat Jamie 'n ent geloop het, lê die ou begraafplaas voor haar. Dis uiteindelik skoongemaak, ontslae van die as en puin wat maande lank tussen die grafstene gelê het. Die Manhattan-eiland is 'n ander plek ná daardie

afgrypslike Dinsdagoggend, meer kwesbaar, minder verwaand. Maar ook hartliker. Sterker. Vir baie Amerikaners het die afgryse van dit wat met New York gebeur het, met verloop van tyd vervaag. Maar dié wat daar woon en werk, sal altyd onthou. Die ramp het 'n onbetwisbare band tussen die inwoners van Manhattan gesmee.

'n Paar meter voor haar knik 'n straatverkoper. "Mooi dag."

"Ja, dit is." Jamie glimlag en hou aan loop.

Sien. Daar is dit weer. Voor 11 September sou 'n straatverkoper nie oogkontak gemaak het, tensy hy 'n worsbroodjie of gekaramelliseerde amandels aan jou wou verkoop. Nou? Nou is die man 'n bekende. Sy sien hom elke keer wanneer sy by St. Paul's gaan diens doen. Hy weet tien teen een waarheen sy op pad is, wat sy doen.

Almal in Manhattan weet van St. Paul's.

Jamie loop oor die straat, steek vas en draai om. Sy doen dit elke dag. Voordat sy by die kapel kan ingaan, voordat sy haar hart kan oopmaak vir die toeriste met hulle kameras en treurende geliefdes wat steeds nie kan wegbly nie, moet sy self eers weer sien dat die torings weg is. Dit het 'n ritueel geword. Sy moet oor die straat kyk na die groteske, kolossale gat waar die geboue eens op 'n tyd gestaan het, weer vir haarself sê waarom sy hier is en wat sy doen, dat terroriste werklik met vliegtuie in die World Trade Center vasgevlieg het en die geboue, sowel as tweeduisend lewens, geëis het.

Omdat Jake een van daardie mense was, is dit asof haar werk by St. Paul's hom op 'n manier lewend hou. Om by Ground Zero te wees en te help ... dis iets wat Jake sou doen. Dis wat hy gedoen het toe hy dood is.

Jamie se blik dwaal op in die leë lug en deursoek onsienlike vloere en vensters. Was hy en Larry, sy beste vriend, op pad boontoe om slagoffers op die boonste verdiepings te gaan help? Of was hy op pad uit? Sy vernou haar oë. As God haar maar net 'n teken wou gee sodat sy kan weet waar om te kyk. Sy knip haar oë en die onsigbare torings verdwyn. Haar trane dreig en sy maak haar oë toe. *Haal net asem, Jamie. Jy is tot alles in staat. Here, help my om dit te doen.*

Sy trek haar asem diep in. En blaas uit ... stadig en reëlmatig. *Here ... help my. My genade is vir jou genoeg, my dogter.*

Sy bid gereeld voor sy ingaan, en amper altyd ervaar sy God se influistering, sy koestering, hoe Hy haar help soos 'n pa sy dogtertjie sou help. Nes Jake Sierra gehelp het.

Die stil stem in die pynlikste deel van haar hart is genoeg. Genoeg om haar die krag en begeerte en vasberadenheid te gee om aan te gaan, om by St. Paul's in te gaan en haar deel te doen om die wag te hou oor alles wat sy meer as drie jaar gelede verloor het.

Sy draai haar rug na waar die torings gestaan het en loop met vasberade treë langs die swart gegote ystertralies verby wat die begraaftaak omhein, om die hoek en deur die klein binneplein voor die kapel. Sy word altyd hier, op die keistene voor die klein kerkie, deur 'n heilige gevoel begroet. Hoeveel

brandweermanne het in die maande ná die aanvalle hiernatoe gekom vir kos of bemoediging of 'n vertroostende skouer? Hoeveel mense was al hier, op soek na hoop of antwoorde of 'n plek waar hulle oor die tragedie kon rou, selfs al is hulle nie persoonlik daardeur geraak nie?

In die voorportaal draai Jamie links en gaan staan. In die hoek is daar 'n tafel met 'n deurmekaar uitstalling van honderde items: vergeelde foto's, aandenkings, briewe wat aan slagoffers van die aanvalle geskryf is. Haar oë beweeg oor die tafel, hou sy foto vir laaste. Onderaan die foto van 'n bles man wat 'n pasgebore baba vashou; hy glimlag van oor tot oor: *Joe, ons wag steeds dat jy huis toe kom ...* Bo-aan 'n troufoto: *Jy was alles vir my, Cecile; jy is dit steeds ...* 'n Kaartjie op die foto van 'n jong brandweerman geplak: *Bofbalwedstryde is nie dieselfde sonder jou nie. Gister het Saul 'n bofslopie geslaan en ons almal het opgekyk. Is jy daar?*

Jamie se oë val elke keer op ander briewe, ander brokkies van mense se pyn en verlies wat deel van die uitstalling vorm. Maar sy eindig telkens op dieselfde plek. By Jake se foto en die briefie wat deur hulle dogtertjie Sierra geskryf is.

Jake was so aantreklik, en selfs hier in die dofverligte hoek is sy oë die helderste blou. *Jake ... ek is hier, Jake.* Wanneer daar nie te veel mense in die gebou rondloop nie, kan sy langer as gewoonlik hier vertoef. Vandag is so 'n dag. Haar oë bly vasgenaël op dié van haar man, en vir 'n oomblik is hy weer daar, staan hy met 'n glimlag en uitgestrekte arms voor haar.

Sy steek haar hand uit en streel oor die foto asof om aan Jake se gesig, sy vel te raak.

"Jake ..."

Vir 'n vlietende sekonde is sy seker sy kan hom hoor. *Jamie, ek is nie weg nie, ek's hier. Kom kyk self.*

Sy trek haar hand terug en vou haar arms om haar lyf. Sy is al voorheen betrap dat sy aan sy foto raak; dit ontsenu die koördineerders. Asof sy dalk nie gereed is om ander mense te bemoedig as sy self nog so stukkend is nie.

Dis nie asof sy vooraf beplan om aan die foto te vat nie; dit gebeur net. Iets aan sy oë in die foto laat hom steeds bo ander mense uitstaan, soos voorheen

...

Voorheen.

Dis juis dit, nie waar nie? Die lewe voor 11 September, en die lewe daarna. Twee heeltemal verskillende lewens. Daar is tye wanneer sy Jake kan hoor. Sy stem weerklink steeds iewers in haar hart, soos dit altyd sal. Haar trane maak dat sy nie kan sien nie en sy byt op haar tande. Sy gaan nie begin huil nie, nie nou nie. Op sy verjaarsdag of hulle huweliksherdenking dalk. Beslis op die herdenking van 11 September. Maar as sy Jake se nagedagtenis wil lewend hou, kan sy nie elke keer in trane uitbars as sy hier kom werk nie.

Sy kyk na die brief wat Sierra 'n paar weke gelede met die derde herdenking van die aanval geskryf het. Haar dogtertjie se ander briewe word in 'n plakboek gebêre, 'n aandenking vir Sierra sodat sy nie die spesiale verhouding

tussen haar en haar pa sal vergeet nie. Elke paar maande skryf Sierra 'n nuwe briefie wat die vorige een op die uitstaltafel vervang. Die briewe verklap dat Sierra steeds nie weet hoe haar pa dood is nie. Sover sy weet, het haar pa nie op 11 September gesterf nie, maar drie maande daarna. Toe hy mense uit 'n brandende gebou probeer red het. Dit is 'n halwe waarheid; die beste wat Jamie onder die omstandighede kon doen.

Sy het net nie geweet hoe om vir Sierra te sê dat die man wat drie maande lank by hulle gebly het, nie regtig haar pa was nie, maar 'n vreemdeling. Dis nou drie jaar sedert Eric Michaels weg is, en Jamie moet nog aan 'n manier dink hoe sy oor die onderwerp gaan praat. Sierra het steeds 'n foto van waar sy by Eric staan. 'n Jaar gelede het Jamie dit op 'n dag weggesmokkel. Sy kan nog steeds die uitdrukking op haar dogtertjie se gesig sien toe sy by die kombuis ingestorm het, haar oë rooi gehuil.

“My foto van my en Pappa is weg!”

Jamie het soos 'n skurk gevoel. Sy het saam met Sierra boontoe gegaan en gemaak of sy daarna soek. Toe haar dogtertjie daardie aand slaap, het Jamie dit uit die kas gaan haal waarin sy dit weggesteek het, en dit weer op Sierra se spieëlkas gaan sit. Reg langs Jake se brandweerhelm.

By twee ander geleenthede het sy probeer om dit met ander foto's te vervang, foto's van Sierra en die “regte” Jake.

“Die een nadat Pappa seergekry het, is te hartseer,” het sy gesê. “Kom ons bêre dit, oukei?”

Maar selfs toe Sierra die ander foto's op haar boekrak uitgepak het, het die een van haar en Eric op die bedkassie gebly. “Dis die laaste foto van my en Pappa. Dit moet vir altyd hier bly. Asseblief, Mamma, moenie dit wegvat nie.”

Die herinnering vervaag.

Sierra was nog nooit in St. Paul's nie; sy weet nie dis waar Jamie soms haar tyd afstaan nie. Dit raak al hoe moeiliker om met die storie van Eric se tyd saam met hulle vol te hou. Jamie haat dit om te jok, en die afgelope tyd begin sy voel dat sy Sierra binnekort die waarheid moet vertel. Haar dogtertjie verdien dit.

Jamie se blik beweeg oor haar dogtertjie se netjiese handskrif en sy lees die brief vir die honderdste keer.

*Liewe Pappa, hoe gaan dit in die hemel? Dit gaan goet met my; ek is in graat twee en Mamma sê eks die slimste in my klas. Maar eks nie rerig so slim nie, want daar is goet wat ek nie weet nie. Hoekom moet Pappa in die hemel wees as ek Pappa hier nodig het? Hoekom kon die mense nie self uit die gebou kom nie? Partykeer maak ek my ogies toe en ek ontou hoe Pappa lyk. Partykeer ontou ek vlindersoenkies. Maar partykeer vergeet ek. Liefde, Sierra.*

Partykeer vergeet sy.

*Dit is die afgelope tyd die moeilikste deel. Die portaal is leeg en Jamie maak haar oë toe. Here, moenie dat ons hom vergeet nie. Hy is by U in die hemel en*

*hy lewe. Maar help Sierra om hom te onthou totdat ons weer bymekaar is. Asseblief. Help haar ...*

Iemand raak aan haar skouer en sy swaai verskrik om. “Aaron!” Sy tree weg van die uitstaltafel en forseer ’n glimlag. “Haai.”

“Hei.” Hy draai halfterug na die binneruim van die kerkie. “Iemand wil ...”

Toe kyk Aaron verby haar na Jake se foto, asof hy nou eers besef waarom sy daar staan. Vir ’n lang ruk sê hy niks nie. Dan kyk hy na haar, die nou reeds bekende diep kyk in sy oë. “Ek’s jammer. Ek het nie besef jy ...”

“Nee, dis oukei.” Sy druk haar hande in haar sweetpaktop se sakke. “Ek het Sierra se brief gelees. Dis nou drie jaar; sy is besig om Jake te vergeet.”

Aaron byt sy onderlip vas en kyk na die vloer.

“Ek moet seker nie verbaas wees nie.” Sy haal haar skouers op. Haar mondhoëke lig effens, maar haar glimlag raak nie aan haar oë nie. “Sy was maar vier toe hy dood is.”

“Ek weet.” ’n Amper eerbiedige stilte hang tussen hulle. “Dis nog steeds moeilik om te glo dat hy weg is.”

“Ja.” Sy kyk weer na Jake se foto. “Ek sukkel nog steeds om dit te glo.”

Sy voel vreemd ongemaklik, soos sy op skool gevoel het wanneer ’n ander seun as Jake vir haar geglimlag of met haar flankeer het. Maar Aaron flankeer nie met haar nie, en sy is nie op skool nie ... en Jake is dood.

Tog ook nie regtig nie; nie terwyl hy steeds so lewensgroot in haar hart is soos wat hy eens in haar huis was nie.

Geen wonder sy voel vreemd skuldig wanneer sy hier by Jake se foto betrap word nie. Sy het al by geleentheid so gevoel, maar net as sy by Aaron was. Sy weier egter om te veel in haar emosies te lees. Dis te verstane dat hulle in ’n warboel is, selfs al is sy en Aaron net vriende.

Hy knik na die middel van die kapel. “Daar is ’n vroultjie op die voorste bank wat jou hulp nodig het. Haar man was ’n polisieman wat in die ineenstorting dood is.” Sy oë ontmoet hare vir ’n paar sekondes. Hy lyk besorg en die ongemaklike gevoel verdwyn. “Sien jy kans?”

“Natuurlik.” Jamie val langs hom in en loop na een van die kerkbanke aan die oorkant van die kapel. Sy wil nog ’n laaste keer na Jake se foto kyk, maar bedink haarself.

Aaron wys na ’n blonde vrou in die voorste ry banke. “Sien jy haar?”

Jamie knik. “Waar gaan jy?”

“Daar oorkant.” Hy kyk na die agterkant van die kapel. Die tafels is teen die mure van die kapel geskuif. ’n Paartjie in hulle sewentigerjare staan naby die agterste muur. “Toeriste. Baie vrae.”

Hulle wissel ’n veelseggende kyk. Dis waarom hulle in St. Paul’s is: om hier te wees vir die mense wat by die deure inkom, om watter rede ook al. Dan draai Jamie na die vrou voor in die kerk.

Sy loop met stadige, gedempte voetstappe tot by die vrou. Baie van die weduwees wat St. Paul’s kom besoek, was al voorheen hier, maar hierdie vrou lyk nie bekend nie. Jamie gaan sit langs haar en wag totdat die vrou na haar



kyk.

“Haai, ek’s Jamie Bryan. As jy wil, kan jy met my gesels.”

Die vrou se oë is rooi en geswel, en al maak sy haar mond oop, wil die woorde nie kom nie. Sy laat sak haar gesig in haar hande en ’n paar geluidlose snikke ruk deur haar lyf.

Jamie sit haar hand op die vrou se rug. Sy skat die gesette vrou in haar laat veertigerjare, en daar is ’n see van pyn in haar oë. Toe die vrou uitgehuil is, snuif sy en kyk in Jamie se oë. “Gaan ... gaan die pyn ooit weg?”

Dis vir Jamie die moeilikste. Sy is by St. Paul’s met een doel: om hoop te gee vir dié wat deur die verliese van 11 September verpletter is. Die probleem is net dat Martha White, die koördineerder van die vrywilligers, reg was. Sy het Jamie van die begin af gewaarsku dat Jamie nie genesing vir haar eie pyn sou kry deur mense oor hulle s’n te beraad nie.

“Ek is oukei,” het sy vir Martha gesê. “Ek’s besig om daardeur te werk, maar ek is oukei by St. Paul’s.”

Martha het skepties gelyk. “Sê my net as dit te veel raak.” Sy het ’n moederlike vinger opgehou. “Jy is ook ’n slagoffer, Jamie.”

Die koördineerder se woorde kom nou by Jamie op en sy sluk swaar. Wat het die huilende vrou haar sopas gevra? Of die pyn ooit weggaan?

Jamie kyk van die vrou na die voorkant van die kerk waar die ou ryklik versierde kruis soos ’n anker staan. Jamie skud haar kop stadig sonder om daarvan weg te kyk. “Nee. Die pyn gaan nie weg nie.” Sy draai weer na die vrou. “Maar God leer ons hoe om daarmee saam te lewe.”

Die vrou word deur nog ’n vlag trane oorweldig. Haar gesig vertrek en sy knyp haar neusbrug tussen haar duim en wysvinger vas. “Dit voel nog steeds soos 12 September. Soms dink ek dit sal altyd so voel.”

’n Stille krag ontvou in Jamie se binneste. God was nog elke keer getrou wanneer iemand haar in so ’n situasie nodig gehad het. Elke keer. Sy draai dwars sodat sy die vrou beter kan sien. “Vertel my van jou man.”

“Hy was in die polisie.” Sy trek haar een skouer op en vee oor haar wange. “Almal praat altyd oor die brandweermanne, maar die polisie het ook swaar deurgeloop.”

Dis nie die eerste keer dat Jamie ’n polisieman se weduwee dít hoor sê nie. “Het jy al ’n bietjie rondgekyk in die kapel?”

“Ek het net begin, toe ... ” Sy hou haar asem op asof om haar snikke te onderdruk.

“Dis oukei, jy kan maar huil.”

“Dankie.” Die vrou se skouers begin weer ruk. “Hierdie kapel ... Dis hoekom ek huil.” Sy kyk soekend in Jamie se oë. “Voor ek hiernatoe gekom het, het ek nie gedink enigiemand gee om nie, en nou ... ”

“Nou weet jy.”

“Ja.” Die vrou trek haar asem in en kyk na ’n plakkaat teen die muur. *Oklahoma gee om*. Onder die opskrif is honderde handafdrukke van kinders wat die bomaanval op die Murrow-gebou in Oklahoma oorleef het. Een reël

lees: *Ons is lief vir ons polisie!* “Ek wou nooit kom nie, want ek wou nie vir iemand kwaad wees nie. Maar dis waar ek moet wees; ek moes al honderde kere gekom het.”

“Ek’s Jamie.” Sy steek haar hand uit en die vrou langs haar neem dit. “Wat is jou naam?”

“Cindy Grammar.” Die vrou glimlag skeef. “Is dit net ek, of voel jy dit ook?”

“Ek voel dit. Almal wat hier inkom, voel dit.”

“Dis die enigste plek waar die nagedagtenis aan al daardie mense voortleef. As ’n groep, jy weet.”

“Ek weet.” Jamie vou haar hande op haar skoot en kyk na die baniere rondom hulle, toe na die gedenkwaardighede op die tafels teen die mure – items wat by Ground Zero opgetel is of naby die kerktrappe gelos is. Die stad sal eendag ’n amptelike gedenkteken vir die slagoffers van 11 September oprig.

“Die stad was lief vir my Bill. Die oomblik toe ek hier instap, kon ek dit voel.”

“Jy’s reg.” Jamie gee Cindy se hand ’n sagte drukkies. “En niemand sal vergeet wat hy daardie dag gedoen het nie. Hy was ’n held, Cindy. Nes die brandweermanne.”

Toe hulle ’n uur later klaar gesels het, voel die vrou gereed om die res van die uitstallings in die gebou te besigtig. Teen daardie tyd het haar trane opgedroog en het sy Jamie vertel hoe sy en haar man ontmoet het en hoe lief hulle vir mekaar was. Jamie ken ook die name van haar twee seuns, en weet dat hulle albei voetbal speel.

“Dankie, Jamie.” Die vrou se oë is steeds hartseer, maar nie sonder ’n tikkie dankbaarheid en vrede nie. “Ek het maande laas so goed gevoel.”

Jamie se hart jubel. Dis haar werk om vir dié wat nie hoop het nie, hoop te bring, en om dit in Jake se naam te doen. Oor en oor en oor. Sy neem Cindy se hand in hare. “Kom ons bid.”

Die vrou krimp ineen. “Ek’s ... ek’s nie seker van God nie, Jamie.”

“Dis oukei.” Jamie se glimlag is opreg, uit ’n plek in haar binneste waar sy God ken soos Jake altyd wou hê sy moes. “God is seker van jou.”

“Rêrig?” Cindy lyk onseker.

“Rêrig. Ons hoef nie te bid nie; jy kan besluit.” Jamie byt op haar lip en wag.

“Ek wil.” Die vrou frons. “Ek weet net nie wat om te sê nie.”

Jamie gee die vrou se hand ’n drukkies. “Ek sal dit sê.” Sy laat sak haar kop en begin, nes sy die afgelope twee jaar al dosyne kere gedoen het. “Here, ons kom na U toe omdat U alles weet. U is soewereien en almagtig en U gee om vir ons. Help Cindy om te glo, Here. Help haar om te verstaan dat U vir ons ’n lamp vashou terwyl ons deur die vallei van doodskaduwee loop. In Jesus Naam, amen.”

Jamie maak haar oë oop.

Daar is ’n nuwe soort vrede op Cindy se gesig. “Ek sal weer ’n draai kom maak.”

Jamie glimlag. “Ek weet.”

Die vrou staan op en loop na een van die tafels met die belofte om binnekort weer te kom sodat hulle dalk weer kan gesels, dalk selfs weer kan bid.

Jamie se hande bewee toe sy weer alleen is. Haar bene is styf van die lang sit. Hierdie soort gesprekke is emosioneel dreinerend en Jamie wil 'n glas water drink voordat sy met iemand anders gesels.

Maar voordat sy die trap bereik, word sy deur 'n vrou genader. Daar is vier jong tienermeisies by haar, elkeen met 'n notaboek gewapen. "Haai, dalk kan jy ons help?"

"Natuurlik." Jamie gee haar volle aandag aan die groep. "Hoe kan ek julle help?"

"Ons is 'n tuisonderriggroep en ..." Sy kyk na die meisies: "... ons het 'n klompie vrae. Die meisies wil uitvind op watter maniere St. Paul's die mense bedien het wat met die opruimingswerk van die puinhoop gehelp het."

"Nou goed." Jamie glimlag, maar daar is 'n krapperigheid in haar. Die puinhoop? Sy wat Jamie is, mag dit so noem, maar hierdie mense is ... hulle is op soek na sensasionele besonderhede, nes die joernaliste. Sy onderdruk haar irritasie en wys na die naaste bank. "Kom sit hier, dan gesels ons."

Besoekende skoolgroepe is niks vreemds nie, en hulle het altyd die vrywilligers se hulp nodig. Hulle wil weet hoeveel liter water uitgedeel is; hoeveel soorte dienste gratis aan die werkspanne gebied is – onder andere pediatrie, massering, berading, chiropraktiese sorg, mediese sorg en optometrie, om maar 'n paar te noem; en watter soort impak St. Paul's en sy vrywilligers op die werkers gehad het – dramaties.

Die vrae stroom in, maar hulle gee nie aanstoot nie. Teen die tyd dat Jamie klaar met die groep gepraat het, is sy spyt oor haar eerste indruk. Die meisies is goedgesmanierd, die ma sensitief vir die inligting wat Jamie verskaf. Dis amper twaalfuur toe die groep vertrek. Jamie se oë dwaal deur die lokaal. Sy is dors, maar die besoekers kom eerste. Die week toe sy as 'n vrywilliger opgelei is, het Martha dit baie duidelik gemaak.

"Slaan die vure dood." Martha, 'n klein vroultjie met 'n groot mond en hart so groot soos die Grand Canyon, was besonder ernstig wat hierdie punt betref. "Gaan na die mense toe wat ontsteld is en huil, iemand wat alleen in 'n bank sit. Dis die mense na wie julle moet uitreik. Net sodat hulle weet julle is daar." Op die oomblik is daar nie vure om dood te slaan nie.

Aaron is aan die oorkant van die lokaal besig om met 'n paartjie te gesels. Dit lyk darem nie of sy gesprek so intens soos hare met Cindy was nie. Haar voete is swaar toe sy by die trap opgaan en na die vrywilligers se ruskamer toe loop. 'n Oop kartonboks met waterbottels staan op die tafel; sy neem een en skroef die doppie oop. Daar is 'n paar stoele, maar sy is moeg gesit. Sy leun teen die klipmuur en kyk op na die gebrandskilderde glas.

Dis snaaks dat Martha dit só moes stel. Dat hulle vure moet doodslaan. Dis nóg 'n manier waarop Jamie Jake se gedagtenis lewend hou. Nee, sy bemoei haar nie met regte vure en brandslange nie. Maar sy is nietemin besig om vure dood te slaan. Hy sou trots op haar gewees het. Trouens, as hy oorleef het, sou

hy vandag saam met haar hier by St. Paul's gewees het. Dis soveel te meer rede om as vrywilliger hier te kom help. Dit gee haar 'n doel, en in daardie sin is dit nie net 'n manier om Jake se gedagtenis, sy offer, lewend te hou nie. Dis ook 'n manier om haarself aan die lewe te hou.

# Chapter TWO

From the moment Clay Michaels started his shift, he felt strange about the day, as if God was trying to tell him something—to warn him. The unsettling sensation churned in his gut and worked through his spine and neck and brain. A knowing, almost, that things weren't right. Or maybe worse. Maybe something awful was about to happen.

Clay wasn't sure exactly what the feeling was, but it bothered him.

All day, while he hunted down the usual speeders on the Ventura Freeway corridor between the San Fernando Valley and the beach exits, the feeling weighed on him. Each time he approached a car his senses went on heightened alert. A college kid late for his classes at Pepperdine; a business guy making time to his office in Camarillo; a carload of tourists unaware of the speed limits. The stops had been routine, nothing more.

Still the feeling stayed with him.

At lunchtime he picked up a McDonald's salad, drove to one of his lookout spots near the westbound Las Virgenes exit, and settled back into his seat.

Maybe the feeling meant it was time to move on.

He'd been to Eric and Laura's house the night before, and the scene had been the same as always. Or the same as it had been since Eric returned home from New York City. Eric and Laura holding hands; Eric and Laura stealing a kiss or two in the kitchen; Eric and Laura sharing a private glance or a joke or an embrace when they thought no one was looking.

Clay tried not to notice. He was happy for them, grateful that the horrific events of September 11 had wrought only good for two people he loved so dearly. Still, he couldn't help but wonder...

He took a bite of his salad and watched a car speed past. *Lucky day, buddy.* Only something dangerous would pull Clay away during a break. Especially when the strange feeling was still gnawing at him. It must've

stemmed from his regrets about Laura, about the fact that their closeness had dissolved—as it had to—the minute Eric walked back through the door. The thing was, too often Clay caught himself watching Laura, remembering the way things were when Eric was gone, when they thought he was dead.

Clay had gone to college in the Midwest and he'd only been back in Los Angeles a few months when the terrorist attacks occurred. After September 11, while they grieved Eric's loss, he and Laura grew closer every day. They even traveled to New York City together to search for him.

When it was finally obvious that he had died in the collapsed towers, they went home, and the bond they shared grew even stronger. Clay had been convinced that he and Laura would wind up together. After all, they'd known each other since high school. Laura had been his first crush.

Josh—Eric and Laura's son—connected with Clay immediately, barely missing his father. And Laura had relied on him for everything. But that was not a surprise. Back then, Eric was a sorry excuse for a husband and father. He'd been obsessed with climbing the corporate ladder, making another deal, traveling to Manhattan as often as the company's president demanded. All at Laura and Josh's expense.

Clay took another bite of his salad and rolled down his window. The air smelled of late summer and fresh-cut grass.

Yes, he'd been shocked to discover Eric was a lousy husband and father. While he was away at school, he assumed things were great between Eric and Laura. Laura was golden, a beautiful woman with a tenderness and compassion that worked its way through everything she said or did. She was worth more than any job, and Clay intended to tell Eric so.

He never got the chance.

Instead his brother headed for New York City and disappeared from their lives for three months. When he returned, he was a changed man, the

victim of amnesia and mistaken identity.

Clay stared at the rolling hills in the distance and watched a hawk land on a lone oak tree. God was here; he could feel it. Never mind the strange certainty that something bad was about to happen, God was here. That was all that mattered.

*God...what You did with Eric...it was all part of Your plan, wasn't it?*

Even now, after three years, he could hardly believe what had happened to his big brother. The story was as strange as it was miraculous. Mistaken for an FDNY guy, a man who apparently loved God and his family in a way that should have earned him honors, Eric was taken to the man's home and family. For weeks he'd done nothing but read the man's Bible, his journal, his notes on loving his wife and their daughter.

When Eric finally remembered who he really was, the other man's wife helped Eric find his way home. He didn't talk about the woman much, but she must have been something, first surviving the shock that Eric wasn't her husband, and then helping him return to Laura and Josh. And though Eric never spoke about his time with the woman, one thing was certain: he was a changed man. Because of that, Laura was the happiest woman in the world, and Josh the happiest eleven-year-old boy.

And Clay?

He dated now and then, but no one ever worked their way into his heart the way Laura had. Though his feelings for her weren't right, they were there. And that made it hard to find someone else, someone he could fall in love with and marry and start a family with. The way he dreamed every day of doing.

Clay exhaled hard and tossed the empty plastic salad container into the backseat. He was about to take a swig from his iced tea when his radio crackled to life.

"Urgent! Calling all cars!" The code that followed told Clay the unthinkable had happened. A carjacking and fatal shooting at the gas station at Las Virgenes exit and Ventura Freeway. Suspect a twenty-five-

year-old Hispanic male, five-ten, muscular, driving the victim's blue 2002 Chevy Tahoe. "Suspect is headed west on 101. Suspect is armed and highly dangerous. Repeat, suspect is armed and dangerous."

Clay straightened as a rush of adrenaline shot through him. He started his car as he grabbed the radio receiver. He identified himself and confirmed that he was at the location and headed toward the suspect.

Other officers gave their location and stated their intent to begin pursuit immediately and provide backup. But none of them were within ten minutes of Clay's location. He would be first on the scene.

"God, go with me."

He whispered that prayer every time he took a call, but this time there was urgency in his voice. He'd known, hadn't he? That something would go down today? He flipped his siren on, spun his car around, and darted across the overpass and down the on-ramp onto the westbound lanes of the freeway. The dispatcher's words screamed at him again. *Armed and highly dangerous*. He leaned toward the windshield, both hands on the steering wheel.

Chases were fairly common on California freeways. Chases involving a crazy man who'd already killed one person were not. It took three minutes for Clay to spot the blue Chevy tearing down the freeway, weaving in and out of traffic. This was their guy. But without backup...

He spoke into the receiver again. "This is Officer Michaels; I've got the suspect in sight. How close is backup?"

Another series of crackling noises filled the car. "We've got CHP officers fifteen minutes away. LAPD detectives ten minutes behind you and catching up. Wait if you can."

If he could?

Too late. The suspect must have seen the red lights and heard the siren. He was picking up speed, darting in and out of all three lanes, jeopardizing everyone on the road. That meant Clay had two choices. Pursue him a few feet from his bumper to help warn drivers he was



approaching, or back off until he had assistance. But backing off didn't guarantee the man would slow down or drive more responsibly. He'd just killed a person; he wouldn't mind if someone else died.

Clay decided to pursue. It was his job, and he wouldn't back off just because he was alone.

He maneuvered his patrol car through the traffic until he was a few yards from the suspect's bumper. He could see the man looking over his shoulder, but he couldn't make out his face. Then the man waved his weapon out the window. It wasn't any ordinary handgun; it was an AK-47. The man aimed it at the sky and fired—clear warning that he intended to kill whoever tried to stop him. Clay tightened his grip on the steering wheel, his palms sweaty. Still no backup in sight.

*Come on, guys...hurry.*

His foot pushed harder at the gas pedal, moving his patrol car even closer to the suspect. He was in firing range, for sure. If the man were able to fire the machine gun at him while still maintaining his high speeds, Clay would already be dead.

Cars were pulling over now, the way he'd wanted them to do. Amazing what the sound of a siren or the sight of a flashing light could accomplish. Clay glanced at his speedometer. Nearly a hundred miles per hour.

At that instant, the suspect darted across all three lanes of traffic, sped up the hill at the Kanan Road off-ramp, and made a sharp, squealing left turn. He bumped two cars traveling in the right lane, but kept going.

Clay pressed the button on his radio receiver. "Suspect has exited the freeway at Kanan Road, heading west."

"Copy. Backup is closing in, a few minutes away."

Clay gritted his teeth. *Please, God...I need help. Hurry them up.* He heard no holy whispers or answers. But the strange feeling grew stronger. Whatever was up ahead, he had to be ready. *God, be with me, whatever happens.*

They sped past a series of condos and buildings as other cars pulled to the side or darted out of their way. Again the suspect waved his gun out the window, and Clay checked his rearview mirror. Nothing.

They neared the twisting turns of the canyon, turns that would force Clay to slow down or risk flying over the edge. Suddenly the suspect jerked his car onto the gravelly shoulder, kicking up a cloud of rocks and dust. Clay was still close behind him, and for a moment he couldn't see anything. He heard the debris hit his windshield as he slammed on his brakes.

The cloud settled, and he saw the man was out of his car, the assault weapon trained on Clay's vehicle. He was going to fire before Clay had a chance to get out of his car, let alone grab his revolver. The cloud of dust and rocks had been the suspect's cover, and now Clay was trapped.

Here he sat, the barrel of an AK-47 pointed straight at him, and he could only think of one thing: *I knew this was coming.*

He ducked just as the man braced himself and fired.

A spray of bullets peppered Clay's windshield, shattering the glass and piercing where he'd been sitting just seconds ago. Clay cocked his revolver, glanced over the dash and fired. He dropped back down as the suspect sprayed another round of bullets. This time they came at closer range, louder, more fierce. The man's footsteps were closing in. Clay gritted his teeth. What could he do? At this close range, he couldn't fire without making himself a target. He raised his hand above the dash and fired blindly. Again the man let loose a burst of gunfire. He was closer now. It was only a matter of time.

How could God let it end this way? Death before he'd ever really found life—the sort of life he'd wanted, with a wife and a family. Senseless death because of a crazy man with an assault weapon. Clay's breathing came in short bursts. *God...no! Help me, please!*

At that instant he heard two things: sirens and footsteps, both coming closer. Backup was almost here. A few more seconds and everything would

be okay. The man shouted something in Spanish, something about having a bad life.

Anger welled up in Clay. He wasn't going to sit there and wait to be shot at; if he was going down, he'd go down fighting. *God...be with me.* He peered over the dash and spotted the man, ten yards away and closing. The suspect saw Clay too. The man pulled the trigger just as Clay fired once—straight at the man's chest—then ducked to the floorboard area.

Even as another spray of bullets ripped through his car, Clay heard the sirens getting louder. His heart pounded. He listened, but he couldn't hear the man coming closer. Had he shot him? Had he actually killed a man? The sirens were right behind him now, and he heard two cars pull onto the shoulder, then the sound of doors slamming. A voice yelled, "Police, don't move!"

Someone was running up from behind, along the passenger side of Clay's car. It could be the suspect, but not likely. Still, Clay aimed his revolver at the opposite door just as Detective Joe Reynolds flung it open and looked inside. "Michaels, you okay?"

"The suspect?"

"He's dead." The officer was a black man, a former attorney who'd grown tired of the corporate world and took up police work. He was a detective now, one of the best. He worked the west end and had an office down the hall from the lunchroom. Clay considered him his closest friend in the department.

"I...I killed him?"

"You did everyone a favor."

Clay's body shook as relief worked its way through him. "A few more seconds and..."

"What'd he do, pull over and come after you?"

"Yeah." Clay set his gun on the seat and pushed himself up. "The guy...he was crazy."

"Must've been flying over a hundred."

“He was.”

Reynolds was still out of breath. “We got here fast as we could. He was dying on the ground, still reaching for his weapon when we pulled up.” He ran his fingers over the bullet holes scattered across the front seat. “Someone must be looking out for you, Michaels. AK-47s don’t usually miss.”

It was true. Even though he’d ducked into the floorboard, he should’ve been hit. Weapons like the assault rifle spray their bullets, and one easily could have ripped through the dash and killed him. “I was praying the whole time.”

Reynolds cocked his head. “I’d say the Big Guy heard you.”

Clay glanced around and saw another officer, one he didn’t know as well, in his patrol car on the radio. Probably calling for someone to come get the body.

Clay looked at the covered figure lying a few yards from his car. Nausea rushed up in his belly. “First time I ever shot a suspect.”

“They’ll want you to take some time, a paid leave.” Reynolds studied him. “Part of the investigation.”

“Right.” He’d had no choice, of course. The man would have killed him if he hadn’t shot. In a situation like that—with a crazed suspect running at you, firing a gun—Clay had been taught there was just one way to do it: shoot to kill.

“You okay?” Reynolds brushed the glass off the passenger seat and sat down beside Clay, his feet hanging out of the car.

“Yeah, I guess.” He couldn’t take his eyes off the covered body. “I don’t like how I feel.”

“Look, Michaels—” Reynolds stared straight ahead, as though remembering something far away—“I’ve been on the other side of this game.” He looked at Clay. “Let’s say you miss. Let’s say ol’ crazy man takes you down instead of the other way around. He could be out on the streets shooting again in twenty, fifteen if the circumstances were right.”

“Fifteen years?”

“I saw it all the time when I wore a suit and tie. All the time.” Reynolds glared at the place where the body lay. “No cop likes to shoot his gun. But in this case it was your life or his and, well, let’s just say things worked out right today. You handled him better than the courts could’ve.” He gave Clay a halfhearted shove in the shoulder. “Of course, you didn’t hear me say that.”

Reynolds climbed out of the car and shut the door. Clay wasn’t shaking anymore, but the ache in his stomach hadn’t gone away. A man was dead because he’d fired his gun. The thought sank in. He’d killed a man on the job; the possibility that always exists for an officer had actually happened.

Clay looked down. He still had shattered glass on his pants. He climbed out of the car, dusted off the crumbly pieces, and leaned against his door. Reynolds was right. It was his life or the suspect’s. And if he was honest with himself, in a small way it felt good to fire the gun at a man who’d already killed someone, who’d put every driver they’d passed on the freeway at risk. Yes, things had worked out for the best, and if he were faced with the situation again, he’d respond the same way.

But a man lay dead on the ground because of him. No matter how good and right his actions were, he still felt sick.

It took an hour for investigators to arrive and collect data, and for the body to be removed and taken to the morgue where an autopsy would be performed. During that time, Clay learned more information about the man. He’d crossed the border south of San Diego two days earlier, killing two border patrolmen in the process. Witnesses said they saw him heading south, and when police dogs lost his trail, the search was called off.

No one knew how he’d gotten from San Diego to the San Fernando Valley, but he stayed beneath police radar until the carjacking.

An investigating officer took a statement from Clay and assured him the process was routine. “Your car’s shattered with bullets, Michaels.

Don't sweat this for a minute."

When Clay got back to the office, Reynolds spotted him and nodded. "They want to see you in the office." He paused, his eyes full of concern. "After that, come see me. I have an idea."

The meeting with the brass was what Clay expected. He was being placed on paid leave until an investigation could be completed. Probably two to three weeks. He was already heading out of the office when his boss stopped him.

"Michaels."

"Yes, sir." Clay felt better than before, but he still didn't have an appetite.

The man tapped a pencil on his desk. "We all hate when this type of thing happens."

"Yes, sir."

"But in this case, I'm glad your aim was on." He leaned forward, eyes intense. "It would've killed me to lose you, Michaels. You're one of the best. Take the break and when you get back, if I have anything to do with it, you'll get a promotion."

A promotion? He'd wanted that since he started with the department. He should be celebrating with a victory fist or a shout. Something. But in light of the day's events, Clay managed only a sad smile. "Thanks, sir. I appreciate that."

The man's eyes clouded. "Don't beat yourself up, Michaels. You did the right thing."

"Okay." Clay held the man's gaze a few seconds more and then turned and headed through the door to Reynolds's office. He shut the door behind him.

"Paid leave?"

"Two or three weeks." Clay shrugged. "When I get back my office might be across from yours."

A grin played out across his friend's face. "I *knew* it. They asked me

last week who I thought was ready.”

“You told ’em me?” Clay sat down and planted his elbows on his knees.

“Nope, I told ’em Hardy down the hall.” Reynolds chuckled. “Of course I told ’em you.”

Clay stared out the window behind Reynolds and wondered. On a day like today, what would it be like to have someone to go home to? Someone to share the details of the chase and the gun battle, someone to hug him and hold him and spend three weeks’ paid leave with. Someone to congratulate him for getting promoted.

Someone to comfort him for what he’d had to do.

“Michaels, you daydreaming again?” His friend raised one eyebrow and slid back from his desk. He kicked his feet up. “I asked you a question, and you just stare out the window like you’re daffy or something.”

“Sorry.” Clay understood. Reynolds was trying to keep things light, helping take the focus off the shooting. “Ask again.”

“I was saying I think I know where we can go for a vacation.”

“Vacation?”

Reynolds pushed a file across the desk. “Take a look.”

Clay opened it and read the flyer inside: *Detective Training Offered by New York’s Finest*. Starting in late November and running through the second week of December, the NYPD was offering a series of workshops and on-the-job training for officers from anywhere in the United States.

“You can’t take three weeks, can you?”

Reynolds smiled. “I can when it’s part of my ongoing training.” “Hmmm.” There was no one waiting at home for Reynolds, same as Clay. It wasn’t something the man ever talked about, and Clay didn’t ask. But on the man’s desk was a small photograph of a pretty brown-skinned woman and a little boy with eyes like Reynolds’s. Clay had the feeling the man had some hidden pain, a story he shared with no one.

“I already talked to the chief. He says he could count three weeks for

your leave. Three weeks in the Big Apple, Michaels. Whaddaya say?"

The idea sounded better with every passing second. He'd wanted to get back to New York ever since the terrorist attacks—same as every police officer and firefighter he knew. But he hadn't had time. Besides, he knew it would be hard—looking at the crater, imagining the lives lost in a single morning. When he had time off, he usually went hunting with guys from the department or boating up at one of the northern California lakes. A trip to New York hadn't figured into his plans.

"Well?" Reynolds crossed his arms, looking proud of himself. "Can I call and sign us up?"

Clay stared at the flyer again. The department had a block of rooms in a hotel on Staten Island. An effort at saving money, no doubt. If the department picked up his bill, it would be a fantastic opportunity. He would come back ready to step into his new role, the sickening memories from earlier that day at least a little dimmer.

He looked at Reynolds. "The two of us, huh?"

"That's right." Reynolds dropped his feet to the floor. "Showing the New York boys how to get it done."

Clay closed the folder and tossed it back on the desk. "Let's do it."

That night when he was back home Clay didn't turn on the television, didn't take a swim in the community pool down the street, didn't do anything except run a mental tape of what happened that day. Every time guilt tried to say something, he stopped it with the truths others spoke to him all day long.

Reynolds telling him he'd done everyone a favor; his captain assuring him he was glad the outcome hadn't been different. The news that the suspect had killed two border patrol officers.

It was his life or the suspect's. Plain and simple.

By the time he turned in for the night, God had replaced his nausea with a certainty that he'd done the right thing. The only thing he could've done. He should be at peace with the situation and how it had played out.



But he wasn't.

Three weeks away would do him good—less because of his gun battle than because he needed a change of scenery. His last thoughts before he fell asleep were proof of that because they were even more wrong than the earlier ones involving the shooting. They were thoughts of his brother's wife. Wrong thoughts. Thoughts that had him wondering what would've happened if Eric had never come home, if he'd never found his way back.

And whether Laura ever wondered the same thing.

## Twee

Die oomblik toe Clay Michaels se skof begin, het hy 'n aardige gevoel oor die dag, asof God iets vir hom probeer sê – hom probeer waarsku. Die verontrustende sensasie op sy maag versprei na sy rug en nek en brein. Dis soos 'n wete dat daar fout is. Of dalk erger. 'n Voorgevoel dat iets aakligs gaan gebeur.

Clay is nie presies seker wat die gevoel is nie, maar dit knaag aan hom.

Die ongedurigheid vreet heeldag aan hom terwyl hy die gewone jaagduiwels op die Ventura-snelweg tussen die San Fernando Valley en die verskeie strandafritte aftrek. Elke keer wanneer hy na 'n motor toe loop, verskerp sy sintuie onwillekeurig. 'n Student wat laat is vir sy klasse by Pepperdine; 'n sakeman wat probeer tyd wen werk toe; 'n motor vol toeriste wat nie van die spoedbeperking bewus is nie. Niks buitengewoons nie.

Maar die gevoel wil nie weggaan nie.

Vir middagete gaan koop hy 'n slaai by McDonald's, ry na een van die uitkykpunte naby die Las Virgenes-afrit en sit agteroor.

Dalk beteken die gevoel dit is tyd om aan te beweeg.

Hy het die vorige aand by Eric en Laura gaan eet, en die aand het soos altyd verloop. Meer spesifiek: soos altyd vandat Eric van New York af teruggekom het. Eric en Laura wat hande vashou; Eric en Laura wat 'n soentjie of twee in die kombuis steel; Eric en Laura wat 'n onderlangse kyk wissel of 'n oomblik se binnepret geniet of mekaar omhels wanneer hulle dink niemand kyk nie.

Clay probeer dit miskyk. Hy is bly vir hulle, dankbaar dat die verskriklike gebeure van 11 September ten goede meegewerk het vir die twee mense wat hy so liefhet. Tog kan hy nie anders as om te wonder nie ...

Hy neem 'n hap van sy slaai en kyk na 'n motor wat verbyjaag. *Jou gelukkige dag, ou vriend.* Clay sal sy middagete slegs vir iets belangriks onderbreek. Veral terwyl die vreemde gevoel steeds aan hom knaag. Dit het waarskynlik iets te doen met sy teleurstelling oor Laura, oor die feit dat hulle innige

verhouding verander het toe Eric weer teruggekom het. En tereg ook. Clay betrap homself egter te gereeld dat hy na Laura kyk en onthou hoe dit was toe Eric nie daar was nie, toe hulle gedink het dat hy dood was.

Clay het by 'n polisiekollege in die Midweste opleiding ontvang, en hy was net 'n paar maande terug in Los Angeles toe die terroriste-aanvalle plaasgevind het. In die maande daarna, terwyl hulle Eric se dood probeer verwerk het, het hy en Laura baie nader aan mekaar gekom. Hulle is selfs saam New York toe om na Eric te gaan soek.

Toe dit uiteindelik duidelik geword het dat hy tydens die ineenstorting van die torings dood is, het hulle huis toe gegaan, en daarna het die band tussen hulle net hefter geword. Clay was daarvan oortuig dat hy en Laura op die ou end dalk selfs sou trou. Hulle ken mekaar immers van skool af. Laura was sy eerste liefde.

Josh – Eric en Laura se seun – het dadelik by Clay aanklank gevind. Dit het trouens nie eens gelyk of hy sy pa mis nie. En Laura het in alles op hom staatgemaak. Nie dat dit regtig 'n verrassing was nie. In daardie stadium was Eric 'n jammerlike verskoning vir 'n eggenoot en pa. Hy was obsessief besig om die sakeleer te klim, die volgende transaksie te beklink, en na die hoof van die maatskappy se pype te dans. Alles ten koste van Laura en Josh.

Clay neem nog 'n hap van sy slaai en draai sy venster oop. Die geur van vars gesnyde gras hang in die laatsomerlug.

Ja, hy was geskok toe hy ontdek het dat Eric 'n treurige man en pa was. Terwyl hy weg was, het hy aanvaar dat Eric en Laura 'n wonderlike verhouding gehad het. Laura is 'n beeldskone, blonde vrou met 'n teerheid en deernis wat gestalte vind in alles wat sy doen en sê. Sy is meer werd as enige loopbaan, en Clay was van plan om dit vir Eric te sê.

Hy het nooit die geleentheid gehad nie.

In plaas daarvan is sy broer New York toe en het hy vir drie maande uit hulle lewe verdwyn. Met sy terugkeer was hy 'n ander mens, die slagoffer van geheueverlies en 'n verkeerde identiteit.

Clay tuur na die golwende heuwels in die verte en sien hoe 'n valk in 'n eikeboom gaan sit. God is hier; hy kan dit aanvoel. Ongeag die vreemde sekerheid dat iets slegs gaan gebeur. God is hier en dis al wat saak maak.

*Here ... dit wat U met Eric gedoen het ... dit was alles deel van u plan, nê?*

Selfs nou, drie jaar later, kan hy amper nie glo wat sy ouer broer oorgekom het nie. Die storie is tegelykertyd bisar en wonderbaarlik. Eric is verkeerdelik vir iemand anders aangesien, 'n brandweerman wat blykbaar 'n besondere liefde vir God en sy gesin gehad het, en hy het by die man se gesin gaan bly. Hy het weke lank niks anders gedoen as om die man se Bybel, sy dagboek en sy aantekeninge te bestudeer en te leer wat dit beteken om sy vrou en hulle dogtertjie lief te hê nie.

Toe Eric uiteindelik onthou wie hy is, het die ander man se vrou Eric gehelp om weer by sy eie huis en gesin uit te kom. Hy praat nie veel oor die vrou nie, maar sy moet 'n besondere mens wees. Eers moes sy die skok verwerk dat

Eric nie haar man was nie, en daarna het sy hom gehelp om weer by Laura en Josh uit te kom. En alhoewel Eric nooit oor sy tyd by die vrou praat nie, bestaan daar geen twyfel nie: Eric is 'n nuwe mens. Vandag is Laura die gelukkigste vrou op aarde en Josh die gelukkigste elfjarige.

En Clay?

Hy sal nou en dan 'n meisie uitneem, maar niemand doen aan sy hart wat Laura gedoen het nie. Alhoewel sy gevoelens vir haar nie reg is nie, is hulle 'n realiteit. En dit maak dat hy moeilik iemand anders gaan kry, iemand wat hy kan liefkry, met wie hy kan trou en saam met wie hy 'n gesin kan hê.

Clay blaas sy asem hard uit en skiet die leë slaaihouertjie op die agtersitplek. Hy wil net 'n sluk van sy ystee neem toe sy radio krakend lewe kry.

“Dringend! Alle motoreenhede!” Clay raak yskoud toe die kode volg. Die ondenkbare het gebeur. Daar was 'n kaping en noodlottige skietvoorval by die garage langs die Las Virgenes-afrit en Ventura-snelweg. Die verdagte is 'n vyf-en-twintigjarige Spaans-Amerikaanse man, vyf voet tien, gespierd, en hy ry met die slagoffer se blou 2002-Chevy Tahoe. “Die verdagte ry wes op die 101. Hy is gewapen en uiters gevaarlik. Ek herhaal, die verdagte is gewapen en gevaarlik.”

Die adrenalin pols deur Clay. Hy skakel sy motor aan terwyl hy terselfdertyd sy radiohandstuk gryp. Hy identifiseer homself, bevestig dat hy in die genoemde area is en sê dat hy in die rigting van die verdagte op pad is.

'n Paar polisiebeamptes verskaf hulle posisies en meld dat hulle bystand sal verskaf. Maar nie een van hulle is binne tien minute van Clay af nie. Hy sal die eerste een op die toneel wees.

“Here, wees by my.”

Hy fluister hierdie gebed elke keer wanneer hy uitgeroep word, maar hierdie keer is daar 'n dringendheid in sy stem. Hy het dit geweet, of hoe? Dat iets vandag gaan gebeur. Hy skakel sy sirene aan en nadat hy sy motor omgeswaai het, jaag hy oor die oprit en neem die westelike afrit. Radiobeheer se woorde weerklink in sy ore. *Gewapen en gevaarlik*. Hy leun vorentoe, albei hande op die stuurwiel.

Agtervolgings is taamlik algemeen op Kaliforniese snelweë. Die agtervolging van 'n mal man wat alreeds een persoon doodgemaak het, is nie. Dit neem Clay drie minute voordat hy die blou Chevy teen 'n hoë spoed deur die verkeer sien vleg. Dis hulle man. Maar sonder bystand ...

Hy praat weer oor die radio. “Dit is sersant Michaels; die verdagte is in sig. Waar trek bystand?”

Die radio kraak. “CHP is vyftien minute van jou af. LAPD-speurders is tien minute agter jou en besig om in te haal. Wag indien moontlik.”

Indien moontlik?

Te laat. Die verdagte moes die rooi ligte gesien en die sirene gehoor het. Hy versnel en swenk oor al drie bane. Die ander motoriste is nou ook in gevaar. Clay het twee opsies. Hy kan óf teen die man se buffer ry en motoriste waarsku dat hy op pad is, óf hy kan terugsak totdat hy hulp het. Maar om

terug te sak, waarborg nie dat die man stadiger of meer verantwoordelik sal ry nie. Hy het sopas 'n moord gepleeg; dit sal hom waarskynlik nie traak as nog iemand in die slag bly nie.

Clay besluit om hom agterna te sit. Dit is sy werk, en hy sal nie terugval net omdat hy alleen is nie.

Hy stuur sy patrolliemotor bedrewe deur die verkeer totdat hy 'n paar meter van die verdagte se buffer af is. Hy kan die man oor sy skouer sien kyk, maar kan nie sy gesig uitmaak nie. Dan steek die man sy wapen deur die venster. Dis nie 'n gewone handwapen nie; dis 'n AK-47. Die man skiet 'n skoot in die lug af – 'n duidelike waarskuwing dat hy enigiemand sal doodskiet wat hom probeer keer. Clay verstyf sy greep op die stuurwiel, sy handpalms klam. Daar is nog geen teken van bystand nie.

*Kom nou, manne ... maak gou.*

Hy trap die petrolepedaal dieper in en beweeg nog nader aan die verdagte. Hy is verseker binne skietafstand. As die man dit kon regkry om op hom te skiet terwyl hy sy hoë spoed handhaaf, sou Clay alreeds dood gewees het.

Genadiglik is van die motors nou besig om af te trek, nes hy gehoop het. Dis ongelooftlik wat 'n loeiende sirene of flitsende ligte kan uitrig. Clay kyk vinnig na sy snelheidsmeter. Amper honderd-en-sestig kilometer per uur.

Op daardie oomblik skiet die verdagte oor al drie bane verkeer, jaag teen die skuinste by die Kanan Road-afrif op en draai met skreeuende bande skerp na links. Hy tref twee motors in die regterbaan, maar jaag verder.

Clay druk die knoppie op sy handstuk. “Die verdagte het die Kanan Road-afrif geneem en ry in 'n westelike rigting.”

“Reg so. Bystand is net 'n paar minute agter jou.”

Clay byt op sy tande. *Asseblief, Here .... ek het hulp nodig. Laat hulle gou hier wees.* Daar is nie 'n heilige influistering in sy binneste nie. Maar die vreemde gevoel word al sterker. Wat ook al voorlê, hy moet gereed wees. *Here, wees by my, wat ook al gebeur.*

Hulle jaag verby 'n klompie meenthuise en ander geboue terwyl ander motors van die pad aftrek of vir hulle uitswaai. Die verdagte waai sy wapen weer in die lug, en Clay kyk in sy truspieëltjie. Niks nie.

Hulle beweeg nou nader aan die gevaarlike esse van die canyon. Clay sal moet stadiger ry as hy nie van die pad af wil jaag nie. Skielik swenk die verdagte na die ongeteerde skouer van die pad en verdwyn in 'n wolk gruis en stof. Clay is steeds net agter hom en vir 'n oomblik kan hy niks sien nie. Sand en gruis spat teen sy voorruit toe hy skerp rem trap.

Toe die stof gaan lê, sien hy dat die man uit sy motor is en sy wapen op Clay se voertuig gerig het. Hy gaan skiet voordat Clay die geleentheid het om uit sy motor te klim, laat staan nog sy rewolwer gryp. Die verdagte was onsigbaar in die stof en gruis en nou is Clay vasgekeer.

Al wat hy binne skoot van 'n AK-47 kan dink, is: *Ek het geweet dit kom.*

Hy koes net toe die man homself anker en 'n skoot afvuur.

Clay se voorruit versplinter toe 'n koeëlreën die windskerm en die plek tref

waar hy sekondes tevore gesit het. Clay haal sy rewolwer oor, loer oor die paneelbord en skiet. Hy koes toe die verdagte nog 'n rondte afvuur. Hierdie keer is hy nader, en die gespat van die koeëls harder, feller. Die man se voetstappe kom nader. Clay kners op sy tande. Wat moet hy doen? Op hierdie afstand kan hy nie skiet sonder om homself 'n teiken te maak nie. Hy steek sy hand bo die paneelbord uit en skiet blindelings. Die man se volgende sarsie skote weerklink. Hy is naby. Dis net 'n kwessie van sekondes.

Hoe kan die Here dit só laat eindig? Hoe kan hy doodgaan voordat hy ooit regtig die gelewe gesmaak het – die soort lewe waarna hy smag, met 'n vrou en 'n gesin? 'n Sinnelose dood deur die toedoen van 'n kranksinnige man met 'n vuurwapen. Clay haal rukkerig asem. *Here ... nee! Help my, asseblief!*

Die volgende oomblik is daar die geluid van naderende sirenes. Dít en naderende voetstappe. Bystand is amper hier. Oor nog 'n paar sekondes sal alles oukei wees. Die man skree iets in Spaans, iets oor sy slegte lewe.

Skielik is Clay kwaad. Hy gaan nie hier sit en wag om doodgeskiet te word nie. As hy vandag moet doodgaan, gaan hy dit nie sonder 'n geveg doen nie. *Here ... wees by my.* Hy loer oor die paneelbord na die man wat nou amper tien meter van hom af is. Die verdagte sien hom ook en trek die sneller net toe Clay een skoot afvuur – reguit na die man se bors – en platval.

Clay kan die sirenes hoor aankom terwyl nog 'n sarsie koeëls deur sy motor ruk. Sy hart klop wild. Hy luister, maar kan nie hoor of die man naderkom nie. Het hy hom geskiet? Het hy vandag iemand doodgeskiet? Die sirenes is nou reg agter hom, en hy hoor twee motors van die pad aftrek, dan die geluid van motordeure wat toegeslaan word. 'n Stem gil: “Polisie, moenie beweeg nie!”

Iemand kom van agter af aangehardloop, na die passasierskant van Clay se motor. Dit kan die verdagte wees, maar dis onwaarskynlik. Sy wapen is nietemin op die oorkantste deur gerig toe speurder Joe Reynolds dit oopruk en inkyk. “Michaels, is jy oukei?”

“Die verdagte?”

“Hy’s dood.” Die swart polisieman is 'n voormalige advokaat wat moeg geraak het vir die korporatiewe wêreld en by die polisie aangesluit het. Vandag word hy as een van die knapste speurders beskou. Hy werk in Los Angeles en sy kantoor is in dieselfde gang as die kafeteria. Hy is Clay se beste vriend in die mag.

“Het ... het ek hom doodgeskiet?”

“Jy het ons almal 'n guns bewys.”

Clay begin bewe namate die verligting deur hom versprei. “Nog 'n paar sekondes en ... ”

“Wat het hy gedoen? Afgetrek en op jou begin skiet?”

“Ja.” Clay sit sy rewolwer op die sitplek neer en lig homself van die vloer af.

“Die ou ... hy was heeltemal mal.”

“Hy moes oor die honderd-en-sestig gery het.”

“Hy het.”

Reynolds is steeds uitasem. “Ons het so vinnig moontlik gekom. Hy het nog gelewe toe ons hier aankom en het vir oulaas op ons geskiet.” Hy raak aan die koeëlgate op die voorste sitplek. “Iemand moes jou beskerm het, Michaels. AK’s mis nie gewoonlik nie.”

Dis waar. Selfs al het hy op die vloer gelê, moes hy eintlik raak geskiet gewees het. Masjiengewere saai hulle koeëls, en een van hulle kon baie maklik deur die paneelbord geruk en hom getref het. “Ek het die hele tyd gebid.”

Reynolds hou sy kop skeef. “Die liewe Here het jou definitief gehoor.”

Clay kyk rond en sien een van die manne in sy patrolliemotor oor die radio praat. Hy is waarskynlik besig om te reël dat die liggaam verwyder word.

Clay kyk na die toegemaakte figuur wat ’n paar meter van sy motor af lê. Die naarheid stoot in hom op. “Dis die eerste keer dat ek iemand geskiet het.”

“Hulle sal wil hê dat jy betaalde verlof neem.” Reynolds kyk ondersoekend na hom. “As deel van die ondersoek.”

“Natuurlik.” Nie dat hy ’n keuse gehad het nie. Die man sou hom doodgemaak het as hy nie geskiet het nie. In só ’n situasie – met ’n waansinnige verdagte wat op jou afgestorm kom terwyl hy skiet – is Clay geleer dat daar net een reaksie is: skiet om dood te skiet.

“Is jy oukei?” Reynolds vee die glas van die passasiersitplek af en kom sit langs Clay, sy voete buitekant die motor.

“Ek dink so.” Hy kan nie sy oë van die lyk af wegskeur nie. “Ek weet nie hoe ek voel nie.”

“Kyk, Michaels,” Reynolds kyk stip voor hom, asof hy iets van lank gelede onthou, “ek was al aan die ander kant van só ’n situasie.” Hy kyk na Clay. “Sê nou jy het gemis. Sê nou die verdagte het jou uitgehaal in plaas van andersom. Hy kon oor twintig, vyftien jaar weer op vrye voet gewees het en tien teen een weer uitgehaak het.”

“Vyftien jaar?”

“Ek het dit gereeld gesien toe ek nog ’n das en baadjie gedra het.” Reynolds kyk na die plek waar die lyk lê. “Nie een van ons hou daarvan om ons wapen te gebruik nie. Maar in hierdie geval was dit ’n kwessie van jou of sy lewe, en kom ons sê maar net dit het vandag reg uitgewerk. Jy het hom beter hanteer as wat die howe sou.” Hy gee Clay ’n halfhartige klop op die skouer. “Jy het dit natuurlik nie by my gehoor nie.”

Reynolds klim uit en maak die deur toe. Clay bewe nie meer nie, maar sy maag is nog seer. ’n Man is dood omdat hy sy wapen afgevuur het. Hy laat die gedagte insink. Hy het ’n man in die uitvoer van sy pligte doodgemaak, ’n moontlikheid wat altyd vir ’n polisieman bestaan.

Clay kyk af en sien sy broek is nog vol glasskerwe. Hy klim uit, stof sy broek af en leun teen sy motordeur. Reynolds is reg. Dit was ’n kwessie van sy lewe of die verdagte se lewe. En as hy met homself moet eerlik wees, is daar ’n deel van hom wat goed voel omdat hy ’n man geskiet het wat alreeds iemand doodgemaak het en ’n klomp motoriste se lewe in gevaar gestel het. Ja, alles

het ten goede meegewerk, en as hy hom ooit weer in 'n soortgelyke situasie bevind, sal hy dieselfde reageer.

Maar deur sy toedoen is daar 'n man wat dood op die grond lê. Maak nie saak hoe goed en reg sy optrede was nie, hy voel siek.

Dit neem 'n uur voordat die speurders al die data ingesamel het en die liggaam na die lykshuis geneem word waar 'n outopsie uitgevoer sal word. In dié tyd vind Clay meer uit oor die man. Twee dae gelede het hy die grens suid van San Diego oorgesteek en twee grenspatrolleerders in die proses doodgeskiet. Getuies het hom in 'n suidelike rigting sien vlug, maar toe die polisiehoude sy spoor verloor, is die soektog afgelas.

Niemand weet hoe hy van San Diego tot by die San Fernando Valley gekom het nie, maar tot en met die kaping het hy onder die polisie se radar gebly.

'n Speurder neem Clay se verklaring af en verseker hom dat dit net roetine is. "Jou motor is vol gate geskiet, Michaels. Jy hoef jou nie vir 'n oomblik te bekommer nie."

Terug by die stasie vang Reynolds sy oog. "Hulle wil jou in die kantoor sien." Hy bly stil en kyk besorg na hom. "Kom na my toe as jy klaar is. Ek het 'n idee."

Die vergadering met die base verloop soos Clay verwag het. Hy is op betaalde verlof totdat die ondersoek voltooi is. Dit sal waarskynlik oor twee of drie weke wees. Hy is alreeds op pad uit toe die stasiebevelvoerder hom keer.

"Michaels."

"Ja, Meneer." Clay voel beter as vroeër, maar hy het nog steeds nie 'n aptyt nie.

Die man tik met 'n potlood op sy lessenaar. "Ons almal haat dit wanneer so iets gebeur."

"Ja, Meneer."

"Maar in hierdie geval is ek bly dat jy raak geskiet het." Hy leun vorentoe, sy oë ernstig. "Dit sou 'n groot slag gewees het om jou te verloor, Michaels. Jy's een van my top-ouens. Gaan rus. En as ek enigiets daarmee te doen het, wag daar 'n bevordering op jou as jy terugkom."

'n Bevordering? Dis sy droom sedert hy by die mag begin werk het. Hy behoort uit sy vel te wees, maar teen die agtergrond van die dag se gebeure kry hy net 'n flou glimlag oor sy lippe. "Dankie, Meneer. Ek waardeer dit."

Die man se oë vertroebel. "Moenie jouself verwyt nie, Michaels. Jy het die regte ding gedoen."

"Oukei." Clay kyk nog 'n oomblik na die man voordat hy omdraai en die deur agter hom toetrek en na Reynolds se kantoor toe loop.

"Betaalde verlof?"

"Twee of drie weke." Clay haal sy skouers op. "En as ek terugkom, gaan ek dalk 'n kantoor oorkant joune hê."

Sy vriend glimlag breed. "Ek't dit gewéét. Hulle het my laas week gevra wie ek dink gereed is."

"En jy het gesê ek is?" Clay gaan sit en plant sy elmboë op sy knieë.

“Nee, Hardy onder in die gang.” Reynolds gee ’n laggie. “Natuurlik het ek gesê jy is.”

Clay staar deur die venster agter Reynolds se lessenaar en wonder. Hoe sal dit wees om op só ’n dag iemand te hê wat tuis op hom wag? Iemand vir wie hy van die jaagtog en die skietery kan vertel, iemand wat hom sal vashou en saam met wie hy drie weke se betaalde verlof kan deurbring. Iemand wat hom met sy bevordering kan gelukwens.

Iemand wat hom kan troos oor wat hy moes doen.

“Michaels, sit jy en droom?” Sy vriend lig ’n wenkbrou, skuif sy stoel terug en tel sy voete op die lessenaar. “Ek het jou ’n vraag gevra en jy staar net deur die venster asof jy hoog in die takke is.”

“Jammer.” Clay verstaan. Reynolds probeer die atmosfeer lig hou, om sy aandag van die skietery af te trek. “Sê weer.”

“Ek sê ek dink ek weet waar ons kan gaan vakansie hou.”

“Vakansie?”

Reynolds skuif ’n lêer oor die lessenaar. “Kyk ’n bietjie.”

Clay vou dit oop en lees die brosjure binnekant. *Speuropleiding deur New York se Elite*. Die New Yorkse polisiemag nooi polisiebeamptes in Amerika vir ’n reeks werkswinkels en indiensopleiding wat van laat Oktober tot en met die tweede week in November aangebied word.

“Jy kan nie sommer drie weke afvat nie, of hoe?”

“Ek kan as dit deel van my voortgesette opleiding is.”

“Hmmm.” Nes Clay is Reynolds ook ’n alleenloper. Dis iets waaroor die man nooit praat nie, en Clay vra nie uit nie. Maar op die man se lessenaar is ’n klein foto’tjie van ’n mooi swart vrou en ’n klein seuntjie met Reynolds se oë. Clay het ’n gevoel dat die man ’n groot seer in hom saamdra, ’n verhaal wat hy met niemand deel nie.

“Ek het alreeds met die hoof gepraat. Drie weke in New York, Michaels. Wat sê jy?”

Die idee klink al hoe aanlokliker. Sedert die terroriste-aanvalle wou hy weer New York toe gaan – nes elke polisiebeampte en brandweerman wat hy ken. Maar daar was nog nie tyd nie. Hy weet dit gaan swaar wees – om na die plekke te kyk waar soveel mense hulle lewens op een dag verloor het. Wanneer hy verlof neem, is dit gewoonlik om saam met die ouens te gaan jag of op een van die mere in die noorde van Kalifornië te gaan roei. ’n Besoek aan New York het nooit gerealiseer nie.

“En?” Reynolds vou sy arms en lyk heel ingenome met homself. “Kan ek bel en namens ons inskryf?”

Clay kyk weer na die brosjure. Die polisiedepartement het verblyf gereël in ’n hotel op Staten Island. Ongetwyfeld in ’n poging om geld te spaar. As die departement sy rekening betaal, sal dit ’n fantastiese geleentheid wees. Met sy terugkeer sal hy gereed wees vir sy nuwe rol, en dalk sal die herinneringe aan vandag se gebeure al ’n bietjie vaer wees.

Hy kyk na Reynolds. “Ek en jy?”



“Dis reg.” Reynolds laat sak sy voete op die vloer. “Dis hoog tyd dat iemand die ouens in New York gaan wys hoe dinge gedoen word.”

Clay maak die lêer toe en skuif dit terug oor die lessenaar. “Ek’s in.”

Ná werk ry Clay huis toe sonder om eers ’n paar lengtes in die openbare swembad te gaan swem. Hy skakel ook nie die TV aan nie. Die hele aand speel die skietvoorval oor en oor in sy gedagtes af. Telkens wanneer hy deur skuldgevoelens geteister word, beveg hy dit met die waarhede wat sy kollegas daardie dag vir hom gesê het.

Reynolds het vir hom gesê hy het almal ’n guns bewys; sy kaptein het hom verseker hy was dankbaar dat dinge nie anders afgeloop het nie. Dan is daar ook die nuus dat die verdagte twee grenspatrolleerders doodgeskiet het.

Dit was sy lewe óf die verdagte s’n. Punt.

Teen die tyd dat hy gaan slaap, het sy naardeid plek gemaak vir ’n sekerheid dat hy reg opgetree het. Dit was sy enigste opsie. Hy behoort vrede te maak met die situasie en hoe dit afgespeel het.

Maar hy kan nie.

Die drie weke in New York sal hom goeddoen – nie soseer om van die skietvoorval weg te kom nie, maar omdat hy ’n verandering van omgewing nodig het. Sy laaste gedagtes voordat hy aan die slaap raak, is bewys daarvan, want hulle is selfs meer verkeerd as die vroeëre gedagtes rondom die skietery. Dis gedagtes wat na sy broer se vrou dwaal. Verkeerde gedagtes. Gedagtes wat hom laat wonder wat sou gebeur het as Eric nooit huis toe gekom het nie, as hy nooit sy pad terug gekry het nie.

En of Laura ooit dieselfde gedagtes koester.

# Chapter THREE

Jamie was back at St. Paul's, her second time that week.

Aaron worked the night shift, and on the days she was at the chapel, he wound up there too. It was just a few blocks from the station, so he would go home and catch some sleep when their shift ended after lunch.

It was still early. Aaron hadn't arrived yet, but a young woman sat in the center of the pews, crying. Jamie drew a deep breath. *God...give me the strength.* She kept her eyes on the woman and took soft, respectful steps toward her.

"Hello, I'm Jamie Bryan, a volunteer here." The woman was actually a teenage girl. In her hands was a picture of a middle-aged man in a suit and tie. The girl's father, no doubt. "Would you like to talk?"

The girl looked up, her eyes swollen and bloodshot. "It's his birthday." She held up the photo. "My father."

A pang of guilt stabbed at Jamie. At least this girl had somewhere to go, a place where her father's memory was honored. Sierra had the right to come here too. If the timing was right, if God gave her the words, she would tell her daughter soon. Maybe before Christmas.

Jamie sat beside the girl. She'd been trained to keep her questions minimal. That way the visitor would steer the conversation the direction they wanted to go. Her heart ached for the girl, who looked a little like Sierra might look in ten years. Long blonde hair, pretty face—and a hole in her heart where her daddy had been.

The girl sniffed and looked at the picture. "He wasn't supposed to go in that day. He was on vacation, but someone called and said they needed him." Her eyes lifted to Jamie's. "I told him I needed him more, but he..." She hung her head. "He thought I was teasing him. 'You have school,' he told me. He kissed...me on the forehead and said he'd see me that afternoon. After I got home from school. Our family was supposed to go away the next morning for a family reunion." She shook her head. "But it

never...”

Jamie slipped her arm around the girl. “I’m sorry.” So much pain, so many wounded and battered hearts still wandering the streets of New York, searching for hope. Sometimes she wasn’t sure she could take another day at St. Paul’s, and yet moments like this, she knew. She was exactly where she was supposed to be, no matter how much it hurt. If she came to St. Paul’s, she would never forget what Jake had done that awful Tuesday.

He might have been helping this girl’s father, for all she knew.

Jamie gave the girl a light squeeze, a half hug that told her she wasn’t alone, that anyone who stayed long at St. Paul’s could understand the hurt she was feeling. Then she took her arm from the girl’s shoulders and faced her. “Are you...I guess I didn’t get your name.”

The girl looked at Jamie again. “Sami. Sami Taylor.”

“Hi, Sami.” Jamie’s tone was soft. “Do you believe in Jesus, Sami?”

“I used to.”

Jamie could almost hear herself telling Jake the same thing, back when he’d wanted nothing more than to share a Sunday morning church service with her. If she could have anything in the world it would be to tell him yes, just once. To go with him to church and sit beside him and pray to the God he’d always believed in. Her only comfort was that somehow, up in heaven, he had to know the truth, had to see that his prayers for her had been answered. She held her breath for a moment. *God...she’s just like I used to be. Give me the words.*

The girl spoke before Jamie had a chance. “When my dad was alive, we’d go to church every Sunday. My mom too. He was a rock, I guess. Sort of the anchor for our family.”

She could’ve been describing Jake. “My husband was that way too.”

“Your husband?”

“Yes.” Jamie swallowed back the lump in her throat. “He was a firefighter.” The past tense still got to her. Her eyes felt the sting of tears, but she blinked them away. “He was in the South Tower helping people

when it collapsed.”

“That’s awful!” The girl’s mouth hung open. “Were you...were you married for very long?”

“Not long enough.” Jamie tried to smile, tried to keep the conversation from going to the deep places where she would break down and cry. Not that it hadn’t happened before, but it couldn’t happen every day. And she didn’t want it to happen now. “We have a daughter. She’s seven now—in second grade.”

“How can you...how can you be here?” Sami waved her hand toward the memorabilia lining the walls. “I would never stop crying.”

This time Jamie’s smile was sad but easy. “I come because God gives me the strength.”

“God let the towers fall.” Her answer was quick, sharp.

“No, Sami.” Jamie took the girl’s hands in her own. “God is good. He has nothing to do with evil.”

Fresh tears filled the girl’s eyes and spilled onto her cheeks. She looked at the picture of her father again. “But He could’ve stopped it.” “There are some things we won’t ever fully understand this side of heaven.” Jamie squeezed the girl’s hands. “What happened September 11 is one of them. But I know this...” Jamie’s voice lowered. She waited until Sami was looking at her. “I couldn’t have survived it without faith in God. Faith that I found after my husband died, even though he prayed for me to find it every day while he was alive.”

Sami’s eyes widened. “So you didn’t always believe?”

“No.” Jamie released the girl’s hands and leaned her shoulder against the hard back of the pew. “My parents died in a car accident when I was about your age. I stopped believing in God that day and didn’t talk to Him again until three years ago.”

The girl shifted and set the photo on her knee. She ran her fingers beneath her eyes. “We were very close.” She looked at Jamie and stifled another sob. “My mom’s a wonderful person, but my daddy knew me

best.” Her gaze fell to the picture again. “I miss him so much.”

“Tell me something, Sami.”

She looked up. “What?”

“Would your dad want you angry at God?” It was more than she would usually say, but that didn’t matter. It was what Jake would’ve said. And since she did this in his honor, she would gently prod and push people back toward God as often as she had a chance.

The girl picked up the photo and held it tight against her chest. She hung her head and uttered a gut-wrenching whisper. “No.”

“If your father loved God, then he’s in heaven now. Probably grateful that you wound up here today.”

Sami nodded. “I think I’ve missed God almost as much as I missed my dad. I had to...had to work at being mad at Him.”

“I know.” And she did. Jamie remembered a conversation she’d had with Jake not long before he died. He’d found out that she’d been asking Sierra about Sunday school. He wanted to know if maybe she’d changed her mind, if maybe she wanted to come one Sunday just to see what it was like. Just to find out if she still wanted to hold a grudge against God.

At the time she’d had to work to tell him no. It was her pride, really. The fact that she didn’t want to need God, didn’t want to love Him. But it wasn’t that she didn’t believe. No matter what she told herself about God not existing and about the Bible being made up of fine-sounding fairy tales, she always knew the truth. God was alive and waiting for her. Hounding her relentlessly until finally He used Jake’s Bible and journal to catch her, to break down the walls and allow her the chance to run to His arms.

“It’s just...” Sami lowered the photo so she could see it again. “I want to be with him on his birthday. And when I get married one day, I want him to walk down the aisle with me. I want it so bad.”

“But you can’t blame God that you won’t have it, okay, Sami? God loves you very much. He loves your dad too.” Jamie took the girl’s hands again. “Let’s pray, okay?”

“Okay.”

They bowed their heads and Jamie prayed. “Suffering is a part of life, God. You showed us that on September 11. We almost never understand why.” She hesitated, trying to keep her composure. “But we know this: You love us. You loved us so much You gave us Jesus. And no matter how much Sami’s suffering right now, You’re here holding her, speaking peace into her heart and soul.” A Scripture came to mind. “Jeremiah 29:11 tells us that You know the plans You have for us. Help Sami remember that, God. Give her Your hope as she leaves this place, Your certainty that You haven’t forgotten her, and that one day she’ll see her father again.”

There was a silence while Jamie waited. She was about to finish up when Sami cleared her throat. “I’m sorry, God. I hate trying to get through this without You. Plus...” She sniffed once more. “Plus You’ve got my dad with You. So please, Lord, tell him happy birthday for me. Please.”

When they finished praying, Jamie hugged the girl and promised to keep praying for her. Before she left, Sami gave Jamie a lopsided grin. “I came here because it was something I could do for my father. But instead...my heavenly Father did something for me.” She stood and touched Jamie’s shoulder. “I wasn’t expecting that.”

After Sami left, Jamie looked across the chapel at Jake’s picture. She could make it out from any spot in the building—maybe not the details of his handsome face, the strength in his jaw, or the sparkle in his eyes, but she could find it all the same.

Sami was right. St. Paul’s was a place where the unexpected happened. It had been that way for three years, ever since the towers collapsed, leaving the old church completely unharmed. It was an unexpected rescue mission back then and, because of conversations like the one she’d just had, it was an unexpected rescue mission now.

She noticed Aaron talking with another volunteer near the television at the back of the chapel. But before she had a chance to tell him hello, two women approached her. They were FDNY widows, women who had been

in before.

“Hi, Jamie.” The first one smiled.

She couldn’t remember their names, but she didn’t want to say so. Instead she exhaled and rose to greet them. “Back again?”

The women looked tentatively at each other. Then the first one crossed her arms. “We want to see about becoming volunteers.”

“Like you,” the other woman said.

“Like me?”

Jamie could hear Martha’s words of warning. “Most FDNY widows won’t ever be ready to take on a job like volunteering at St. Paul’s. Discourage women who want to be like you as much as possible, for their sakes.”

Jamie had bristled at the coordinator’s comment. “It’s good for me; why wouldn’t it be good for them?”

“You’re the exception, Jamie. Trust me. For most people volunteering at St. Paul’s wouldn’t work them through the stages of grief, it would stall them.”

“What if someone asks about it and I’m not sure?”

Martha had given her a wry sort of smile. “You’ll know. Ask them a few questions. If they break down, they’re not ready.”

Jamie blinked at the women, hating what she was about to do. The questions she had to ask were like poking a pin at an open wound to see if it was healing. But if Martha was right, it was the only way to make sure the women were able to move past their own grief long enough to help strangers with theirs.

“Why don’t you come this way and we’ll talk about it.” Jamie led the women back to the pews, to the same place where she’d been sitting with Sami a few moments earlier. She started with the more outspoken of the two. “I’m on your side, ladies, but sometimes people only think they’re ready for volunteer work here.” Her voice was low, discreet. “Can you each tell me what you’ve done to work through your losses?”

The first woman nodded. “I’ve been in counseling at my church for a year. Sometimes I take my children with me—so they can talk about their feelings.”

“Do they remember their father?”

“Yes.” The woman’s eyes flooded. She folded her hand and stared at her lap for a moment. “The youngest doesn’t, but the other three remember him.”

“If someone sat across from you and told you they’d stopped believing in God because of what happened September 11, would you feel comfortable helping them find their faith again?”

This time the woman looked up, and a strength filled her eyes. “Absolutely. That’s why I’m here. I believe God wants me to share His truth with people who come here hurting.” She looked at her friend, and then back at Jamie. “The way you shared it with us the first time we came in.”

Jamie patted the woman’s shoulders. She was passing with flying colors. Usually by now widows who weren’t ready would be breaking down, asking questions of their own. Questions they had a right to ask, but that proved they weren’t ready to work at St. Paul’s. Not this woman.

“I understand there’s an application we have to fill out?” The strength in the woman’s eyes was softened by a compassion that only came from knowing pain personally.

“Yes.” Jamie hesitated. “I’m sorry. I remember you, of course, but I’ve forgotten your names. A lot of people come through here.”

“I’m Janice.” She nodded to her friend. “This is Beth.”

“And Beth, what about you? Tell me about your husband.”

She lifted a dainty shoulder. “I don’t know; he was my hero, I guess.”

“You were married a long time?” Just because Jamie was ready for work at the chapel didn’t mean Beth was.

“We’d only been married three years. I was—” Her voice broke. She looked up at the cross and bit her lip. “I was expecting our first baby, our



son, when he died.”

“I’m sorry.” Jamie leaned forward. “Would you feel comfortable talking about that with strangers?”

For a moment Beth said nothing, only kept her eyes glued to the cross. Then, as tears streamed down her cheeks, she gave a slow shake of her head. “No, his memory is too precious for that.”

Jamie waited.

Beth looked at Janice and then at Jamie. “I guess I’m not ready for this. I’m sorry. I thought I was. I wanted to be ready.”

“There are lots of things you can do, Beth, even if this isn’t one of them.” Jamie’s heart ached for the woman. Next to her, Janice gave her friend a hug.

After a moment, Jamie handed Beth a tissue. When she was more composed she looked at Jamie. “What can I do? Everywhere I go, people have forgotten about September 11. It’s as if it bothers them to remember that it ever happened at all. But I want to do something.”

“You can go home and love that little boy. He’s three years old, Beth. He needs you. And you can keep alive every single memory you ever shared with your husband. You can write them in a journal so that when your son is old enough he’ll feel as if he knew his daddy personally.”

Beth’s eyes filled with another layer of tears, but there was something else there. A light, a ray of hope the woman hadn’t had before. “I never thought of that.”

Jamie kept her tone compassionate. “If you don’t do that for your son, who will?”

When the women left late that morning, Janice had an application, and Beth had a plan, a purpose. Proof again that Jamie’s work at St. Paul’s was important, that it did indeed carry on Jake’s legacy—offering people hope in the name of Jesus Christ.

And that morning, the results were so strong, so eternally important, Jamie could almost feel Jake working beside her.

## Drie

Jamie is weer by St. Paul's, haar tweede keer hierdie week.

Aaron werk nagskof en wanneer Jamie by die kapel diens doen, is hy gewoonlik ook daar. Dis net 'n paar blokke van die stasie af; dus kan hy huis toe gaan en gaan rus wanneer hulle skof by die kapel ná middagete klaar is.

Dis nog vroeg. Aaron is nog nie daar nie, maar 'n jong vrou sit op een van die middelste banke en huil. Jamie trek haar asem diep in. *Here ... maak my sterk.* Sy hou haar oë op die vrou terwyl sy met sagte treë na haar toe loop.

“Hallo, ek's Jamie Bryan. Ek werk as 'n vrywilliger hier.” Die vrou is toe eintlik 'n tienermeisie. In haar hande is 'n foto van 'n middeljarige man in 'n pak. Waarskynlik die meisie se pa. “Wil jy gesels?”

Die meisie kyk op, haar oë geswel en rooi gehuil. “Dis sy verjaarsdag.” Sy hou die foto op. “My pa.”

Jamie kan nie anders as om skuldig te voel nie. Hierdie meisie het ten minste 'n plek waarheen sy kan kom, 'n plek waar haar pa se nagedagtenis lewend gehou word. Sierra het ook die reg om hiernatoe te kom. As die tyd reg is, as God haar die woorde gee, sal sy haar dogtertjie vertel. Dalk voor Kersfees.

Jamie gaan sit langs die meisie. Sy is opgelei om haar vrae tot die minimum te beperk. Sodoende kan die besoeker die gesprek stuur. Haar hart kramp vir die meisie, wat lyk soos wat Sierra dalk oor tien jaar sal lyk. Lang, blonde hare, 'n mooi gesiggie – en 'n leemte in haar hart waar haar pappa was.

Die meisie snuif en kyk na die foto. “Hy was nie veronderstel om daardie dag te gaan werk nie. Hy was op vakansie, maar iemand het gebel en gesê dat hulle hom by die werk nodig het.” Haar oë ontmoet Jamie s'n. “Ek het vir hom gesê ek het hom meer nodig, maar hy ...” Sy laat haar kop hang. “Hy het gedink ek terg hom net. ‘Jy gaan laat wees vir skool,’ het hy gesê. Hy het my op my voorkop gesoen en gesê dat hy my die middag sou sien. Wanneer ek van die skool af kom. Ons gesin was veronderstel om die volgende dag na 'n familie-reünie toe te gaan.” Sy skud haar kop. “Maar dit het ...”

Jamie sit haar arm om die meisie se skouers. “Ek's jammer.” Daar is soveel pyn, soveel stukkende harte wat steeds soekend na hoop deur die strate van New York dwaal. Soms voel dit asof sy dit nie nog 'n dag by St. Paul's gaan uithou nie, maar op sulke oomblikke weet sy. Sy is presies waar sy veronderstel is om te wees, maak nie saak hoe seer dit is nie. Solank sy na St. Paul's toe kom, sal sy nooit vergeet wat Jake daardie aaklige Dinsdagoggend gedoen het nie.

Vir al wat sy weet, het hy dalk nog hierdie meisie se pa gehelp.

Jamie gee die meisie 'n sagte drukkies asof om vir haar te wys dat sy nie alleen is nie, dat enigiemand wat lank by St. Paul's is, begrip het vir die pyn wat sy ervaar. Dan los sy die meisie se skouer en draai na haar. “Is jy ... ek dink nie jy het jou naam gesê nie.”

Die meisie kyk weer na Jamie. “Sami. Sami Taylor.”

“Haai, Sami.” Jamie se stem is sag. “Glo jy in Jesus?”

“Ek het altyd.”

Jamie hoor haarself in die meisie se antwoord. Soos sy destyds geklink het toe dit Jake se grootste begeerte was om haar Sondae saam met hom by die kerk te hê. As sy vir enigiets kon vra, sou dit wees om net een keer in te stem. Om saam met hom kerk toe te gaan en langs hom te sit en tot die God te bid waarin hy altyd geglo het. Haar enigste troos is dat hy, waar hy in die hemel is, sekerlik weet dat sy gebede vir haar verhoor is. Vir ’n oomblik hou sy haar asem op. *Here ... ek was net soos sy nou is. Gee my die regte woorde.*

Die meisie praat voordat Jamie die geleentheid het. “Toe my pa gelewe het, het ons elke Sondag kerk toe gegaan. My ma ook. Hy was soos ’n rots. Soort van die anker van ons gesin.”

Dit kon netsowel ’n beskrywing van Jake gewees het. “My man was ook so.”

“Jou man?”

“Ja.” Jamie probeer die knop in haar keel afsluk. “Hy was ’n brandweerman.”

Dit vang haar steeds om in die verlede tyd te praat. Haar oë brand, maar sy baklei teen die trane. “Hy was in die suidelike toring toe dit neergestort het.”

“Dis verskriklik!” Die meisie se mond hang oop. “Was julle baie lank getroud?”

“Nie lank genoeg nie.” Jamie probeer glimlag, probeer die gesprek wegstuur van die plek waar haar trane te vlak lê. Nie dat sy nie al voorheen gehuil het nie, maar dit kan nie elke dag gebeur nie. En sy wil nie hê dit moet nou gebeur nie. “Ons het ’n dogtertjie. Sy is nou sewe – in graad twee.”

“Hoe kan jy ... hoe hou jy dit hier uit?” Sami wuif na die aandenkings teen die mure. “Ek sal nooit ophou huil nie.”

Jamie glimlag hartseer maar ongeforseerd. “Ek kan, want die Here gee my die krag.”

“God het die torings laat neerstort.” Haar antwoord is skerp.

“Nee, Sami.” Jamie neem die meisie se hande in haar eie. “God is goed. Hy het niks met die bese te doen nie.”

Die meisie se trane loop opnuut oor haar wange. Sy kyk weer na die foto van haar pa. “Maar Hy kon dit gekeer het.”

“Daar is sekere goed wat ons nooit in hierdie lewe sal verstaan nie.” Jamie gee haar hande ’n drukkie. “Wat op 11 September gebeur het, is een daarvan. Maar van een ding is ek seker ... ” Jamie praat sagter. Sy wag totdat Sami na haar kyk. “Ek sou dit nie oorleef het as ek nie my geloof in God gehad het nie. ’n Geloof wat ek eers ná my man se dood ontdek het, selfs al het hy elke dag van sy lewe vir my redding gebid.”

Sami se oë word groot. “So jy het nie altyd geglo nie?”

“Nee.” Jamie los die meisie se hande en sit dwars met haar skouer teen die bank se harde rugleuning. “Toe ek omtrent so oud soos jy was, het my ouers verongeluk. Ek het daardie dag opgehou om in God te glo en nie meer met Hom gepraat nie.”

Die meisie sit die foto op haar skoot neer en vee haar wange af. “Ons was baie na aan mekaar.” Sy kyk na Jamie en baklei teen haar trane. “My ma is ’n wonderlike mens, maar my pa het my verstaan.” Sy kyk weer na die foto. “Ek mis hom verskriklik.”

“Kan ek jou iets vra, Sami?”

Sy kyk op. “Wat?”

“Sou jou pa wou hê dat jy vir die Here moet kwaad wees?” Dis meer as wat sy gewoonlik sou sê, maar dit maak nie saak nie. Dis wat Jake sou sê. En aangesien sy dit ter nagedagtenis aan hom doen, sal sy mense sagkens na die Here bring as die geleentheid hom voordoen.

Die meisie tel die foto op en hou dit styf teen haar bors vas. Sy laat sak haar kop en fluister gesmoord. “Nee.”

“As jou pa lief was vir die Here, is hy nou in die hemel. En hy is tien teen een dankbaar dat jy vandag hier uitgekome het.”

Sami knik. “Ek mis die Here amper net soveel soos wat ek my pa mis. Ek moet ... ek moet hard daaraan werk om vir Hom kwaad te bly.”

“Ek weet.” Dis die waarheid. Jamie dink aan ’n keer toe sy en Jake kort voor sy dood gesels het. Hy het uitgevind dat sy Sierra oor haar Sondagskoollesse uitvra. Hy wou weet of sy dalk van plan verander het, of sy miskien een Sondag saam met hom wou kerk toe gaan, net om te sien hoe dit is. Net om uit te vind of sy steeds ’n wrok teen die Here wou koester.

Op daardie tydstip moes sy daaraan werk om nee te sê. Dit was eintlik maar net haar trots. Die feit dat sy God nie wou nodig hê nie, dat sy Hom nie wou liefhê nie. Maar dit was nie dat sy nie geglo het nie. Maak nie saak wat sy haarself oor God se bestaan of die Bybel se outentisiteit wou wysmaak nie, sy het dit altyd geweet. God bestaan en Hy wag op haar. Hy het meedoënloos aan haar hart geklop en het uiteindelik Jake se Bybel en dagboek gebruik om haar te laat oopmaak, om die mure af te breek en haar die kans te gee om na Hom toe te kom.

“Dis net ...” Sami laat sak die foto sodat sy weer daarna kan kyk. “Ek wil op sy verjaarsdag by hom wees. En wanneer ek eendag trou, wil ek hê hy moet saam met my in die paadjie afloop. Ek wil dit so graag hê.”

“Maar jy kan nie die Here blameer omdat jy dit nie het nie, Sami. God is baie lief vir jou. En vir jou pa.” Jamie neem die meisie se hande. “Sal jy saam met my bid?”

“Oukei.”

Hulle laat sak hulle koppe en Jamie bid. “Lydende is deel van ons lewe, Here. U het dit die elfde September vir ons gewys. Ons verstaan amper nooit hoekom dit so moet wees nie.” Sy aarsel, en probeer ’n houvas op haar emosies kry. “Maar dit weet ons vas: U is lief vir ons. U is so lief vir ons dat U Jesus vir ons gegee het. En maak nie saak hoe groot Sami se lyding op die oomblik is nie, U wil haar vashou en vir haar vrede gee.” ’n Teksvers kom by haar op. “In Jeremia 29:11 lees ons dat U vir ons ’n toekoms wil gee. Help Sami om dit te onthou, Here. Gee vir haar hoop wanneer sy vandag hier

weggaan, wys vir haar dat U nie van haar vergeet het nie, en dat sy eendag weer haar pa sal sien.”

Daar is ’n oomblik se stilte terwyl Jamie wag. Sy wil net afsluit toe Sami haar keel skoonmaak. “Ek’s jammer, Here. Ek haat dit om sonder U hierdeur te moet gaan. En ...” Sy snuif. “En dan is my pa ook nog by U. Asseblief, Here, sê vir hom ek sê geluk met sy verjaarsdag. Asseblief.”

Toe hulle klaar gebid het, gee Jamie haar ’n drukkie en belowe om vir haar te bid. Voordat sy loop, glimlag Sami skeef. “Ek het hiernatoe gekom, want ek het gedink dis iets wat ek vir my pa kon doen. Maar op die ou end ... het my hemelse Pa iets vir my kom doen.” Sy staan op en raak aan Jamie se skouer. “Ek het dit nie verwag nie.”

Nadat Sami uit is, kyk Jamie na Jake se foto aan die oorkant van die kapel. ’n Mens kan dit van enige plek in die gebou af sien – dalk nie die besonderhede van sy aantreklike gesig, sy sterk ken of die glinstering in sy oë nie, maar haar oë weet presies waar hy is.

Sami is reg. St. Paul’s is ’n plek waar die onverwagse gebeur. Dit was nog altyd so, sedert die torings drie jaar gelede ineengestort het en die ou kerk ongedeerd bly staan het. Dit was in daardie dae ’n onvoorsiene reddingsmissie en danksy gesprekke soos dié met Sami, is dit vandag steeds ’n onverwagse reddingsmissie.

Aaron staan by ’n ander vrywilliger naby die TV agter in die kerk en gesels. Maar voordat sy kans het om hom te gaan groet, word sy deur twee vroue genader. Hulle is brandweerweduwees, vroue wat al voorheen daar was.

“Haai, Jamie.” Die eerste een glimlag.

Sy kan nie hulle name onthou nie, maar voel te verleë om so te sê. In plaas daarvan blaas sy haar asem uit en staan op. “Het julle weer kom inloer?”

Die vroue kyk onseker na mekaar. Dan vou die eerste een haar arms. “Ons wil kom uitvind hoe ons vrywilligers kan word.”

“Soos jy,” sê die ander vrou.

“Soos ek?”

Jamie hoor Martha se waarskuwende woorde. “Die meeste brandweerweduwees sal nooit gereed wees om as vrywilligers by St. Paul’s te kom werk nie. Doen jou bes om vroue wat soos jy wil wees, af te raai, om hulle ontwil.” Jamie was ergerlik oor die koördineerder se opmerking. “Dis goed vir my; hoekom sal dit nie vir hulle goed wees nie?”

“Jy is ’n uitsondering, Jamie. Vertrou my. Die meeste mense sal nie deur hulle rouproses kan werk terwyl hulle hier as vrywilligers diens doen nie. Dit sal hulle herstel net belemmer.”

“Sê nou iemand kom praat met my daaroor en ek is nie seker nie?”

Martha het halfwrang geglimlag. “Jy sal weet. Vra ’n paar vrae. As hulle in trane uitbars, is hulle nie gereed nie.”

Jamie kyk na die vroue en wens sy hoef nie hierdie gesprek met hulle te hê nie. Die vrae wat sy moet vra, is soos om ’n speld in ’n oop wond te steek om te kyk of dit gesond word. Maar as Martha reg is, is dit die enigste manier om

seker te maak dat die vrou gesond genoeg is om hulle eie pyn lank genoeg opsy te skuif sodat hulle vreemdelinge kan help.

“Kom saam met my, dan gesels ons daaroor.” Jamie lei die vrou na die bank toe waar sy ’n paar minute gelede by Sami gesit het. Sy begin by die meer spraaksame vrou. “Ek is aan julle kant, dames, maar soms dink mense net dat hulle gereed is om vrywilligers te word.” Haar stem is sag, diskreet. “Kan julle my vertel wat julle gedoen het om julle verlies te verwerk?”

Die eerste vrou knik. “Ek gaan al ’n jaar lank vir berading by ons kerk. Soms vat ek my kinders saam met my sodat hulle oor hulle gevoelens kan praat.”

“Onthou hulle hulle pa?”

“Ja.” Die vrou se oë raak vol tranen. Sy vou haar hande en kyk vir ’n oomblik af op haar skoot. “Nie die jongste nie, maar die ander drie onthou.”

“Sê nou iemand sit oorkant jou en sê dat hulle ná 11 September opgehou het om in God te glo. Sal jy gemaklik voel om hulle te help om hulle geloof terug te kry?”

Hierdie keer is die vrou se oë helder toe sy opkyk. “Absoluut. Dis waarom ek hier is. Ek glo die Here wil my gebruik om sy waarheid te bring aan die mense wat hiernatoe kom.” Sy kyk na haar vriendin en dan weer na Jamie. “Soos jy gedoen het toe ons die eerste keer met jou kom praat het.”

Jamie plaas haar hand op die vrou se skouer. Sy slaag met vlieënde vaandels. ’n Weduwee wat nog nie gereed is nie, sou teen hierdie tyd in tranen gewees het en haar eie vrae gevra het. Vrae wat sy met reg kan vra, maar wat bewys dat sy nog nie gereed is om by St. Paul’s te werk nie. Nie hierdie vrou nie.

“Ek verstaan dat ’n mens ’n aansoekvorm moet invul?” Die krag in die vrou se oë word getemper met ’n deernis wat net uit persoonlike pyn gebore is.

“Ja.” Jamie aarsel. “Ek’s jammer. Ek onthou julle gesigte natuurlik, maar ek het julle name vergeet. Daar is so baie mense wat hiernatoe kom.”

“Ek’s Janice.” Sy knik na haar vriendin. “Sy is Beth.”

“En Beth, wat van jou? Vertel my van jou man.”

Sy trek ’n fyn skouer op. “Ek weet nie; hy was my held.”

“Was julle lank getroud?” Die feit dat Janice gereed is om by die kapel te werk, beteken nie Beth is nie.

“Ons was net drie jaar getroud. Ek het ...” Haar stem breek. Sy kyk op na die kruis en byt op haar lip. “Ek het ons eerste baba verwag toe hy dood is, ons seuntjie.”

“Ek’s jammer.” Jamie leun vooroor. “Sal jy met vreemdelinge daaroor kan gesels?”

Vir ’n oomblik sê Beth niks nie; net haar oë bly vasgenael op die kruis. Dan skud sy haar kop stadig terwyl haar tranen kom. “Nee, dit maak nog te seer.”

Jamie wag.

Beth kyk na Janice en dan na Jamie. “Ek dink nie ek is gereed hiervoor nie. Ek is jammer. Ek het gedink ek is. Ek wou gereed wees.”

“Daar is baie dinge wat jy kan doen, Beth, selfs al kan jy nie hier help nie.” Jamie se hart pyn vir die vrou. Langs haar gee Janice haar vriendin ’n

drukke.

Na 'n oomblik gee Jamie vir Beth 'n snesie. Toe sy haar emosies onder beheer het, kyk sy na Jamie. “Wat kan ek doen? Oral waar ek gaan, het die mense van 11 September vergeet. Dis asof dit hulle pla om te onthou dat dit ooit gebeur het. Maar ek wil iets doen.”

“Jy kan huis toe gaan en vir jou klein seuntjie lief wees. Hy is drie jaar oud, Beth. Hy het jou nodig. En jy kan elke herinnering wat jy van jou man het, lewend hou. Jy kan hulle in 'n dagboek neerskryf sodat wanneer jou seuntjie oud genoeg is, dit vir hom sal voel asof hy sy pa persoonlik geken het.”

Beth se tranes loop van voor af, maar daar is nou iets anders in haar oë. 'n Lig, 'n sprankie hoop wat die vrou nie vroeër gehad het nie. “Ek het nooit daaraan gedink nie.”

Jamie se stem is vol deernis. “As jy dit nie vir jou seuntjie doen nie, wie sal?” Toe die vroue later daardie oggend groet, het Janice 'n aansoekvorm en Beth 'n plan, 'n nuwe doel. Nog 'n bewys dat Jamie se werk by St. Paul's belangrik is, dat dit regtig 'n manier is om Jake se nalatenskap voort te sit – om mense in die Naam van Jesus Christus hoop te gee.

En vanoggend is die resultate so kragtig en van soveel ewige belang dat Jamie amper kan voel hoe Jake hier langs haar aan die werk is.

## Chapter FOUR

Some volunteers stayed on at St. Paul's indefinitely—people like Jamie and Aaron Hisel. But most worked for a season and then moved on. Which meant the little chapel always needed new volunteers.

As Jamie headed for the stairs that morning, she thought about Janice. From what she could tell, the woman would be a wonderful addition to the staff. Close enough to share the pain of visitors who needed comforting; strong enough to offer them the spiritual hope they needed.

But as wonderful as the morning's outcome had been, Jamie was exhausted, emotionally drained. More so than usual. She headed for the break room and grabbed a blueberry muffin from the table. People were always bringing in cases of water or trays of baked goods for the volunteers. A way of encouraging them to continue the work they did at St. Paul's.

Jamie peeled back the wrapper and took a bite. The issue with Sierra was weighing on her. How was she supposed to tell her daughter the truth? Should it happen in stages? Maybe start by telling her that her father was killed in the Twin Towers with hundreds of other firefighters, and then see if she remembered having someone who looked and acted like her daddy living with them after that?

Footsteps sounded on the stairs and Jamie looked up to see Aaron step into the break area. "How'd it go?" He took a bottle of water and dropped to the nearest seat. "That first one looked tough."

"It was."

"A couple of volunteers from the weekend showed up." He crossed his arms and gave a slight tilt of his head. "Let's leave early. We can grab a bite to eat and take it to the park."

"Battery Park?"

"Right." He grinned, something she couldn't remember seeing him do until well after the second anniversary of the attacks. "Central Park might



make you late for Sierra.”

“True.” She pulled herself to her feet, finished her water, and waited for him. There was something different in his eyes, something she couldn’t quite make out. She didn’t say anything. She’d ask him later, on the way to the park.

He finished his drink, stood, and led the way down the stairs. They bid the other volunteers good-bye and left. The sun was overhead now, warming the early October afternoon. Jamie pulled a pair of sunglasses from her small bag and slipped them on. She and Aaron were comfortable together. Every moment between them didn’t need to be filled with conversation, and they stayed silent as they passed the crater where the towers had stood.

Jamie waited a few more blocks, then she shaded her eyes and looked at him. “What’s on your mind?”

“Hmmm?” Aaron raised his eyebrows. “Nothing, why?”

“Yes, something.” She looked straight ahead again. “I saw it in your eyes back at the chapel.”

The captain shoved his hands into his FDNY windbreaker and kept his tone even. “What’d you see?”

“I don’t know.” Their conversation had a casual pace. “Something I haven’t seen before. I’m not sure.”

“Hmmm.” The corners of Aaron’s lips raised just a notch. He turned into a café and looked at her over his shoulder. “Let’s get lunch.”

They ordered turkey sandwiches, chips, and two cans of pop, which the deli man packed in one bag. Aaron carried it, and ten minutes later they reached Battery Park and found a bench with a view of the harbor.

Aaron pulled out her lunch first, and then his. He was about to take a bite, when she bowed her head and started praying. “Thank You, God, for our food. Thank You that we can find meaning and purpose helping the people at St. Paul’s. You’re a good God, Lord, and You know the plans You have for us. Amen.”

A chuckle came from Aaron. “You insist on doing that, don’t you? Praying for me?”

Jamie smiled. “If I don’t do it, who will?”

She and the captain didn’t exactly see eye to eye on matters of faith, but she would never preach at him or force him to see things her way. It hadn’t worked for her when she was the one on Aaron’s side of the fence. It wouldn’t work for him, either.

“No one, and I’m fine with that.” He took a bite of his sandwich.

“I know, Aaron.” Her tone was mixed humor and mock boredom. “God doesn’t exist. Same drivel I used to drive Jake crazy with.”

He opened his mouth to say something, then changed his mind. Instead he took another bite. “Good sandwich.”

“Okay, fine.” She held up her turkey roll. “Good sandwich.”

“Brat.” He gave her a light nudge in the ribs with his elbow. “I’m not that stubborn. You could try a little harder.”

She felt her eyes dance in light of the easy banter. “Would it work?”

“No.” He set his sandwich down and laughed again. “But you could at least try.”

They finished their sandwiches, their arms occasionally brushing against each other. Two people had stepped up and become her support system since Jake died. Sue, who’d been married to Jake’s friend, Larry—another FDNY man lost on September 11—and Aaron.

She appreciated Aaron most at times like this, when she couldn’t rattle off another statistic about the terrorist attacks, couldn’t give another hug without running to the picture of Jake and falling in a heap on the floor. Times when the chance to smile or laugh gave her one more piece of tangible proof that yes, she would survive. Somehow she would keep waking up, keep breathing, keep raising Sierra the best she knew how, and the world wouldn’t come to an end.

Aaron finished his sandwich, tossed the wrapper in the bag, and set it on the ground. He turned to her and the look was back, the one she’d seen

earlier in St. Paul's break room.

"There it is again." She had her sandwich in her hands, but she let them fall to her lap. "That look, the one I was telling you about earlier."

"You don't let up, do you?"

"No. You can't hide anything from me." Jamie stuffed what was left of her sandwich into the bag and pushed the wrapper in after it. "You shouldn't even try."

"Is that right?"

"Yes." She crossed her ankles and stared out at the harbor. Aaron would tell her what was on his mind. He always did. He was a man of few words, the type who communicated more through glances and nuances. And because of that, he was nothing like Jake. Certainly he lacked Jake's way of lighting up a room, the charisma that came so naturally for Jake. No, Aaron's appeal was subtler, but after sharing her grief with him over the past years, they were close enough that she was right.

Jamie could read him perfectly.

They were quiet again, watching a triple-decker boat of tourists sail past on their way to the Statue of Liberty.

Finally he cleared his throat and looked at her. "Can I throw something out there?"

"Of course."

His eyes grew deeper than before. "How long, Jamie?"

"How long?" For the first time in a long while, Aaron had her stumped. "How long what?"

Aaron squinted at the sun's reflection on the water. "How long before you're ready to move on with life?"

"Move on?" Fear kicked Jamie in the gut and left her breathless. "I am moving on. Working at St. Paul's is moving on."

"Not that way." He leaned over and dug his elbows into his knees. His eyes found hers. "Jamie, I have feelings for you." His tone was heavy and certain. A long sigh sifted between his lips, and he looked out at the

water again. “I’ve wanted to tell you for a long time.”

Jamie felt her eyes grow wide, frightened. She wasn’t sure what to do next. Had she read Aaron wrong from the beginning? He’d wanted friendship, right? So where had this...this change of heart come from? Or had it been there all along and she just hadn’t wanted to see it? Part of her wanted to back up slowly, turn around, and run for her life. But still another part needed to hear him out. Not because she was ready for what he was saying, or because she could even manage the thought of Aaron being anything more than her friend. But because deep in her soul she’d known he was going to say this.

She’d known it and been so afraid she hadn’t been able to admit it even to herself.

Her fingers shook. She laced them together to keep them from catching Aaron’s attention.

He looked at her again. “Don’t leave me hanging here, Jamie.” He forced a laugh. “I cough up the hardest words I’ve ever said and you’re speechless.”

“I don’t...” She raked her fingers through her hair and leaned hard against the back of the bench. “You’re one of my best friends, Aaron. I haven’t...I can’t...”

Aaron shifted his position so he faced her squarely. Then, while his eyes never left hers, he took her hands. His voice fell and mixed with the breeze coming off the water. “You can, Jamie. We’re together all the time, anyway. We’ve been through more than most people ever go through before having a first date.”

First date?

The words hit her like fingernails on a chalkboard. She could feel the blood draining from her face. What if Jake could somehow see her from heaven? What if he could see her sitting on a bench beside Aaron Hisel talking about a first date? The idea made her shudder.

“Look, Jamie.” Aaron straightened and his expression eased. “I know

it's going to take time, but I've been thinking about it." He stood and pulled her to her feet. "We belong together. I'll take it as slow as you want to go. Just give it some thought, okay?"

Everything in her wanted to scream at him. No, it wasn't okay. No, she wouldn't think, even for a split second, about dating or loving or mar—

She couldn't bring herself to finish the thought. She wanted to turn around and see Jake standing there laughing, wanted to hear him telling her it was all a bad joke, that Captain Hisel certainly wasn't suggesting they find their way into a relationship when Jake Bryan was the only man she'd ever love.

But she couldn't do any of those things, because Jake was gone. He'd been gone three years and he wasn't coming back. And the truth was, if she didn't want to be alone for the rest of her life, it was only logical that she might wind up with someone like Aaron, someone who shared September 11 with her, who could relate to the losses she'd suffered because in some ways they were his losses too.

Aaron wasn't quite six feet tall, but he had her beat by a few inches. He looked down at her, his eyes a sea of patience. "Just think about it, Jamie. Okay?"

"Okay." She felt all disconnected, as if her mouth was operating separate from her heart and mind and soul. "I'll think about it."

A smile played in Aaron's eyes. "Good." He pulled her close and gave her an easy hug, then walked with her toward the ferry. It was earlier than she usually left, but she needed some alone time, time to process what he'd just told her.

All afternoon while she was waiting for Sierra to come home from school, and even while she helped her daughter with homework, Jamie tried to consider the idea of dating Aaron Hisel.

By the time she tucked Sierra in for the night and gave her butterfly kisses the way Jake used to do, she had willed herself to consider the idea without feeling sick with betrayal. He was handsome, a great guy who

knew her pain better than any other man except Eric Michaels—and she'd never see him again.

She and Aaron shared an event that would forever color their pasts, forever shape their futures. Maybe he was right; maybe it was a logical idea, a way to ensure that she and Sierra wouldn't be alone.

It wasn't until she was falling asleep that she remembered something from earlier that day. They'd been eating lunch and Aaron's arm had brushed up against hers. She'd made a note of it, but only in the most comfortable sense. Because Aaron was her friend.

But when her arm had brushed up against Jake's arm—even the last week of his life, when they were jet skiing together—she felt the sensation throughout her body. Jake's touch was electrifying; it had always been that way. But Aaron? Aaron's was comfortable, nothing more.

So maybe that wasn't a bad thing. Maybe there'd never be anyone who electrified her heart and soul the way Jake did, but maybe that was okay. It was still possible she and Aaron could build a relationship. After all, Jake was gone, and she was more lonely than she wanted to admit.

There was one problem.

She'd always been honest with Aaron. She could tell him she'd think about the possibility of the two of them; she could promise he would always be her friend no matter what, even if that meant a comfortable friendly out-together-sometimes relationship. That would be the truth. But if she told him she was open to the possibility of finding their way together, to the chance of falling in love with him, she'd be doing something she'd never done to him before.

She'd be lying.

The place in her heart for electricity and sparks and fireworks, the place that still went weak at the knees at his memory, would always belong to one man and one alone: Jake Bryan.

Even if she had to wait a lifetime to see him again.

## Vier

Daar is vrywilligers wat vir 'n onbepaalde tydperk by St. Paul's aanbly – mense soos Jamie en Aaron Hisel. Maar die meeste kom werk net vir 'n seisoen voordat hulle aanbeweeg. Wat beteken dat die klein kerkie altyd nuwe vrywilligers nodig het.

Toe Jamie daardie oggend na die personeelkamer toe loop, is haar gedagtes by Janice. Uit wat sy kan aflei, sal die vrou 'n wonderlike aanwinst vir die personeel wees. Naby genoeg om in die pyn te deel van besoekers wat vertroosting nodig het; sterk genoeg om hulle die geestelike hoop te bied wat hulle nodig het.

Maar ongeag die produktiewe oggend is Jamie gedaan, emosioneel uitgeput. Meer as gewoonlik. Sy gaan na die ruskamer toe en kry vir haar 'n bloubessie-muffin. Daar is altyd mense wat kratte gebottelde water of skinkborde eetgoed vir die vrywilligers bring. 'n Manier om hulle aan te moedig om met die werk by St. Paul's voort te gaan.

Jamie neem 'n happie van die muffin. Die kwessie rondom Sierra weeg swaar op haar hart. Hoe is sy veronderstel om die waarheid vir haar dogtertjie te vertel? Moet sy dit in fases doen? Dalk begin deur vir haar te sê dat haar pa saam met honderde ander brandweermanne in die Twin Towers dood is, en dan probeer agterkom of sy onthou dat iemand wat soos haar pa gelyk het, by hulle kom bly het?

Daar is voetstappe op die trappies en Jamie kyk op toe Aaron in die deur verskyn. “Hoe het dit gegaan?” Hy neem 'n bottel water en gaan sit op die naaste stoel. “Jou gesprek met die meisie het intens gelyk.”

“Dit was.”

“'n Paar vrywilligers van die naweek het hier opgedaag.” Hy vou sy arms en hou sy kop skeep. “Kom ons loop vroeg. Ons kan iets kry om te eet en park toe gaan.”

“Battery Park?”

“Ja.” Hy grinnik, iets wat hy in die eerste twee jaar ná die aanvalle nooit gedoen het nie. “Jy sal dalk laat wees vir Sierra as ons Central Park toe gaan.”

“Jy's reg.” Sy staan op, drink haar water klaar, en wag vir hom. Daar is iets anders in sy oë, iets wat sy nie kan peil nie. Sy sê niks nie. Sy sal hom later vra, op pad na die park toe.

Hy drink sy water klaar, gaan saam met haar ondertoe en sê vir die ander vrywilligers totsiens. Dis 'n sonnige, warm Oktobermiddag en Jamie sit haar donkerbril op. Sy en Aaron is gemaklik in mekaar se geselskap, en hulle hoef nie heeltyd te gesels nie. Hulle loop in stilte verby die leemte waar die torings gestaan het.

Jamie wag nog 'n paar blokke, toe kyk sy na hom. “Wat loop jy en dink?”

“Hmmm?” Aaron lig sy wenkbroue. “Niks nie. Hoekom?”

“Ek kan sien daar's iets.” Sy kyk weer voor haar. “Ek het dit in jou oë gesien by die kapel.”

Die kaptein druk sy hande in sy baadjiesakke en hou sy stem gelykmatig.

“Wat het jy gesien?”

“Ek weet nie.” Daar is ’n rustigheid aan hulle gesels. “Tets wat nie voorheen daar was nie.”

“Hmmm.” Aaron se mondhoeke lig baie effens. Hy gaan by ’n kafee in en kyk oor sy skouer na haar. “Kom ons koop hier iets om te eet.”

Hulle bestel hoendertoebroodjies, skyfies en twee blikkies gaskoeldrank. Aaron dra die eetgoed en tien minute later kom hulle by die park aan en gaan sit op ’n bankie wat oor die hawe uitkyk.

Aaron haal eers haar broodjie en koeldrank uit, dan syne. Hy is op die punt om sy toebroodjie te begin eet toe sy haar kop laat sak en begin bid. “Dankie vir ons kos, Here. Dankie dat ons sin en betekenis daaruit kan put om die mense by St. Paul’s te help. U is ’n goeie God, Here, en U weet wat U vir ons beplan. Amen.”

Aaron gee ’n laggie. “Jy sal ook nooit ophou nie, nè?”

Jamie glimlag. “Om vir jou te bid? As ek dit nie doen nie, wie sal?”

Sy en die kaptein voel nie dieselfde oor geloofsake nie, maar sy sal nooit vir hom preek of haar standpunte op hom probeer afdwing nie. Dit het nie vir haar gewerk toe sy nog nie die Here geken het nie. Dit sal ook nie vir hom werk nie.

“Niemand nie, en dit pas my.” Hy neem ’n hap van sy toebroodjie.

“Ek weet, Aaron.” Haar stem is ’n kombinasie van humor en geveinsde verveeldheid. “God bestaan nie. Dis wat ek ook tot vervelens toe vir Jake gesê het.”

Hy maak sy mond oop om iets te sê, maar bedink hom en vat nog ’n hap. “Lekker toebie.”

“Oukei.” Sy hou haar toebroodjie op en bekyk dit. “Lekker toebie.”

“Spot maar.” Hy pomp haar liggies in die ribbes. “En terloops, ek’s nie só hardkoppig nie. Jy kan gerus ’n bietjie harder probeer.”

Haar oë dans terwyl hulle gemoedelik skerts. “Sal dit werk?”

“Nee.” Hy sit sy toebroodjie neer en lag weer. “Maar jy kan ten minste probeer.”

Hulle arms raak nou en dan aan mekaar terwyl hulle eet. Sedert Jake se dood het daar twee mense op die voorgrond getree en haar ondersteuningstelsel geword. Sue wat met Jake se vriend, Larry, getroud was – nog een van die brandweermanne wat op 11 September dood is. En Aaron.

Sy waardeer Aaron veral op sulke dae, wanneer sy nie nóg ’n statistiek van die terroriste-aanvalle kan aframmel of vir nog iemand ’n drukkie kan gee sonder om na Jake se foto toe te vlug en in ’n hopie neer te sak nie. Op sulke dae is die kans om te glimlag of te lag ’n tasbare bewys dat sy wel sal oorleef. Op ’n manier sal sy steeds soggens wakker word, asemhaal, ’n ma vir Sierra wees, en sal die wêreld nie vergaan nie.

Aaron eet klaar en druk sy servet in die sak op die grond. Hy draai na haar en dieselfde kyk is in sy oë, die kyk wat sy vroeër in St. Paul’s gesien het.

“Daar is dit weer.” Haar broodjie is steeds in haar hande, maar sy laat sak



hulle op haar skoot. “Die kyk waarvan ek vroeër gepraat het.”

“Jy het ook nie einde nie, nè?”

“Nee. Jy kan niks vir my wegsteek nie.” Jamie druk die res van haar toebroodjie en die sellofaanpapier in die sak. “Moenie eens probeer nie.”

“Is dit so?”

“Ja.” Sy kruis haar enkels en tuur uit oor die hawe. Aaron sal vir haar sê wat in sy gedagtes omgaan. Hy het nog altyd. Hy is ’n man van min woorde, iemand wat meer met sy gesig en nuanses kommunikeer. En daarom is hy glad nie soos Jake nie. Hy het nie die manier om ’n kamer op te helder of die charisma wat so deel van Jake was nie. Nee, Aaron se aantreklikheid is meer subtiel, maar nadat sy haar verlies die afgelope drie jaar met hom gedeel het, is hulle vriendskap van só ’n aard dat sy reg is.

Sy lees hom soos ’n boek.

Hulle is weer stil en kyk na ’n driedubbeldekkerboot vol toeriste wat na die Vryheidstandbeeld toe op pad is.

Uiteindelik maak hy keel skoon en kyk na haar. “Kan ek sommer ’n klip in die bos gooi?”

“Natuurlik.”

Sy oë raak ernstig. “Hoe lank, Jamie?”

“Hoe lank?” Vir die eerste keer in ’n lang ruk het Aaron haar onkant gevang.

“Hoe lank wat?”

Aaron skreef sy oë teen die son se glinstering op die water. “Hoe lank gaan dit wees voordat jy gereed is om aan te beweeg met jou lewe?”

“Aan te beweeg?” ’n Skielike vrees kom sit op die krop van haar maag. “Ek is besig om aan te beweeg. Deur by St. Paul’s te werk.”

“Nie op daardie manier nie.” Hy leun vooroor en rus met sy elmboë op sy knieë. Hy kyk in haar oë. “Jamie, ek voel meer vir jou as net vriendskap.” Daar is ’n swaar sekerheid in sy stem. Dan sug hy lank en kyk weer na die water. “Ek wou dit al lankal vir jou sê.”

Jamie se oë word groot en bang. Sy is nie seker wat sy nou moet doen nie. Het sy Aaron van die begin af verkeerd gelees? Sy was seker dat hy net haar vriend wou wees. Waar het hierdie ... hierdie ander emosies vandaan gekom? Of was dit nog altyd daar en wou sy dit net nie raaksien nie? ’n Deel van haar wil stadig retireer, omdraai en vlug vir haar lewe. Maar ’n ander deel wil hom laat praat. Nie omdat sy gereed is vir wat hy wil sê nie, of omdat sy haarself enigsins kan voorstel dat Aaron meer as net ’n vriend is nie. Maar omdat sy diep in haar binneste geweet het dat hy dit gaan sê.

Sy het dit geweet en was só bang dat sy dit nie eens teenoor haarself kon erken nie.

Haar hande bewe. Sy strengel haar vingers ineen om te keer dat Aaron dit raaksien.

Hy kyk weer na haar. “Moet asseblief nie net stilbly nie, Jamie.” Hy gee ’n geforseerde laggie. “Ek het sopas die moeilikste woorde van my lewe gesê en jy is sprakeloos.”

“Ek weet nie ... ” Sy kam met haar vingers deur haar hare en sit agteroor.

“Jy’s een van my beste vriende, Aaron. Ek het nie ... ek kan nie ... ”

Aaron draai skuins sodat hy reguit na haar kan kyk. Toe, sonder om haar oë vir ’n sekonde te laat gaan, neem hy haar hande. Sy stem is sag en sy woorde meng met die briesie wat van die water af kom. “Jy kan, Jamie. Ons is in elk geval die hele tyd bymekaar. Ons het baie meer saam deurgemaak as die meeste mense wat op ’n eerste afspraak uitgaan.”

’n Eerste afspraak?

Die woorde is soos vingernaels wat oor ’n swartbord getrek word. Sy voel hoe sy verbleek. Sê nou Jake kan haar op die een of ander manier uit die hemel sien? Sê nou hy kan haar op ’n bankie langs Aaron Hisel sien sit en oor ’n eerste afspraak hoor gesels? Die gedagte laat haar ril.

“Kyk, Jamie.” Aaron sit regop en sy uitdrukking versag. “Ek weet dit gaan tyd neem, maar ek het daarvoor gedink.” Hy kom orent en trek haar op. “Ons hoort saam. Ek sal nie vinniger beweeg as waarvoor jy kans sien nie. Dink ten minste net daarvoor, oukei?”

Haar hele wese wil vir hom skree. Nee, dis nie oukei nie. Nee, sy sal nie daarvoor dink nie, nie eens vir ’n sekonde nie. Sy weier om aan ’n eerste afspraak of liefde of ’n huwe.. –

Sy kan haar nie sover bring om die gedagte te voltooi nie. Sy wil omdraai en in Jake se laggende gesig vaskyk. Sy wil hê hy moet vir haar sê dat alles net ’n grap was, dat kaptein Hisel nie besig is om voor te stel dat hulle ’n verhouding aanknoop terwyl Jake die enigste man is wat sy ooit liefgehad het nie.

Maar sy kan dit nie doen nie, want Jake is weg. Hy is al drie jaar lank weg en hy gaan nie terugkom nie. Sy sal daarmee moet vrede maak: As sy nie vir die res van haar lewe alleen wil wees nie, is dit net logies dat sy haar lewe met iemand soos Aaron moet deurbring, iemand wat die elfde September met haar deel, wat met haar verliese kan identifiseer omdat hulle op ’n manier ook sy verliese was.

Aaron is nie heeltemal ses voet nie, maar hy is ’n bietjie langer as sy. Hy kyk af na haar, die wêreld se geduld in sy oë. “Dink net daarvoor, Jamie. Oukei?”

“Oukei.” Sy voel vreemd, asof haar mond se funksionering niks met haar hart of verstand te doen het nie. “Ek sal daarvoor dink.”

’n Glimlag speel in Aaron se oë. “Goed.” Hy trek haar nader en gee haar ’n drukkie voordat hy saam met haar na die veerboot toe loop. Dis vroeër as gewoonlik, maar sy het tyd op haar eie nodig, tyd om te verwerk wat hy sops vir haar gesê het.

Terwyl sy die middag wag dat Sierra van die skool af moet kom, en selfs terwyl sy haar dogtertjie later met haar huiswerk help, probeer Jamie haar gedagtes rondom ’n afspraak met Aaron Hisel orden.

Toe sy Sierra daardie aand in die bed sit en vir haar ’n vlindersoentjie gee, iets wat Jake altyd gedoen het, forseer sy haarself om aan die idee te dink sonder om siek van verraad te voel. Hy is aantreklik, ’n wonderlike mens wat haar

pyn beter as enige ander man buiten Eric Michaels verstaan – en sy gaan vir Eric nooit weer sien nie.

Sy en Aaron deel 'n gebeurtenis wat hulle verlede vir altyd ingekleur en hulle toekoms vir altyd verander het. Dalk is hy reg; dalk is dit 'n logiese idee, 'n manier om te verseker dat sy en Sierra nie alleen sal wees nie.

Dis eers toe sy aan die slaap raak dat 'n gedagte by haar opkom. Hulle het geëet en Aaron se arm het aan hare geraak. Sy het dit opgelet, maar niks daarin gelees nie. Want Aaron is haar vriend.

Maar wanneer haar arm aan Jake s'n geraak het – selfs toe hulle daardie laaste Vrydag saam gaan waterponie ry het – het die sensasie deur haar hele liggaam versprei. Jake se aanraking was gelaai; dit was van die begin af so. Maar Aaron? By hom ervaar sy 'n gemaklikheid, niks meer nie.

Dalk is dit nie so sleg nie. Dalk gaan daar nooit weer iemand wees wat daardie vonk in haar hart aansteek nie, maar miskien moet sy haar daarby berus. Sy en Aaron kan aan 'n verhouding werk. Jake is weg, en sy is eensamer as wat sy wil erken.

Daar is net een probleem.

Sy was nog altyd eerlik met Aaron. Sy kan vir hom sê dat sy aan die moontlikheid van iets meer sal dink; sy kan belowe dat hy altyd haar vriend sal wees, maak nie saak wat nie, selfs al beteken dit 'n platoniese soms-saam-uitgaan-vriendskap. Dit sal die waarheid wees. Maar as sy vir hom sê dat sy ontvanklik is vir die moontlikheid van 'n toekoms saam met hom, vir die kans om op hom verlief te raak, sal sy iets doen wat sy nog nooit aan hom gedoen het nie.

Sy sal jok.

Die plek in haar hart vir elektrisiteit en vonke en vuurwerke, daar waar sy steeds lam in die knieë raak, sal vir altyd aan net een man behoort: Jake Bryan.

Selfs al moet sy haar hele lewe lank wag voordat sy hom weer sien.

## Chapter FIVE

Sue Henning was walking past a picture of Larry, hurrying from one room to another trying to clean the house for Jamie's visit, when it hit her. Larry had been dead for three years. Three long years.

The anniversary of September 11 didn't allow her time for private reflection, but sometimes—without warning—she would hear Larry's hearty laugh, or smell a faint whiff of his cologne from the bathroom where it stood to this day, untouched. Something would trigger his memory, the image of his sweet freckled face—and the enormity of his loss would hit her all over again.

It happened less often these days, and that, in and of itself, was painful. How dare her mind and heart and soul move on without him, without the life they'd known and loved? They had two children, and once in a while something seven-year-old Katy said or the way little Larry—not quite four—waved at her with one finger, the same way her Larry had always waved at her, triggered the loss.

This time it was the photograph.

The look in Larry's eyes reached out and stopped her in her tracks, demanded that here, now, she remember all he was and all she'd lost. Sue sucked in a fast breath and grabbed the edge of the countertop where the photo stood.

*Larry...I haven't forgotten.*

She looked at the edges of his face, the way his eyes twinkled, and she tried to remember those same lines in motion, smiling and talking and loving her late at night. The memory of them was dimmer now, and there was nothing she could do about it. Time stole a little more of it every day.

The doorbell rang, and just as quickly the moment passed.

Jamie hadn't been by in a week, and Sue missed her terribly. The two were closer than sisters since September 11. They talked about their kids—Katy and Sierra were still best friends—and the ways they spent their time.

But mostly they talked about the past, about happy moments and memories that had no chance of surviving if they weren't unfolded and held up for display every now and then.

Her friendship with Jamie was God's gift, no doubt. A safe harbor, a place where they could each be completely vulnerable, no matter if the world thought it was time they moved on. And in the midst of that harbor, Sue had found in Jamie the best girlfriend she'd spent a lifetime wishing for.

She gave a last look at Larry's picture and called out over her shoulder. "Just a minute..."

It was four o'clock in the afternoon, so Sierra would be with Jamie. The girls could hardly wait to play together and days like this—when the sun was still shining and winter seemed a month away—they could go out back and play the way they'd played since they were toddlers.

Her house was on Staten Island, same as Jamie's. It gave them more room to spread out than they'd have had with a house in the city, and a way to feel disconnected from the hustle of Manhattan. She opened the door and grinned at Jamie. "I miss you, girl. You have to come more than once a week!"

Jamie hugged her. "I know. I was having withdrawals."

Sierra stepped in, her blonde hair falling like a silk curtain over her shoulders. "Hi, Mrs. Henning. Is Katy upstairs?"

"Yes, honey." Sue hugged Sierra. "She's waiting for you."

"Thanks." Sierra ran off and stopped only a moment to brush her fingers through little Larry's hair. "Hi, buddy. Whatcha doing?"

The boy was wearing a miniature Nets jersey, and he had a basketball under one arm. "Shooting hoops."

Larry's small plastic basketball hoop stood on one side of the living room, surrounded by a sofa and a loveseat. Sue didn't mind the boy shooting baskets in the house. The child was practically fanatical about the sport; as long as he had a ball in his hands he was happy. And if he was

happy, she and Jamie could hold a conversation without interruption.

Sierra ran off, and Sue motioned to a quieter alcove, a place where they could sit and still see little Larry, but not be hit by loose balls. Sue had made iced tea, and two tall glasses stood on a table surrounded on two sides by comfy chairs.

Jamie was quieter than usual. She dropped into one of the overstuffed chairs, planted her elbows on the arms, and covered her face. After a moment she let her hands fall to her lap and she looked at Sue. "I wanted to come earlier, but Sierra begged me to wait until she was out of school." Jamie's tone was serious, the corners of her eyes tight with the small lines of worry. She pursed her lips, her eyes locked on Sue's. "You aren't going to believe this."

Sue took the seat closest to her friend and tried to seem interested. "Something at St. Paul's?" Jamie almost always started their conversations with a story from St. Paul's. There was a time when Sue wanted nothing more than to be at the quaint little chapel. For months she would've gladly gotten up every day and gone to St. Paul's, walked the walls of memories and mementos, and pretended even for an hour that the souls lost that day were still vibrant and alive.

But never once had she considered volunteering there.

She was worried about Jamie. It was one thing to help out for a while. But Jamie had been working three days a week, sometimes four, ever since the first anniversary, the day they reopened the chapel to the public.

Jamie shook her head; her face was tight and pale. "Not St. Paul's. Captain Hisel."

"Captain Hisel?" Sue wrinkled her nose. Jamie and the captain were friends; everyone knew that. Now Sue felt her heart skip a beat as she waited for the news. "He's okay, isn't he?"

"Yes." She gave a quick nod. "Nothing like that."

Sue felt her heart skitter back into a normal rhythm. That was one thing about September 11. Before that day, Sue was vaguely aware of

tragedy; now in some morbid sort of way, she expected it. As if by expecting it, the eventual blows life dealt would somehow be easier to take. “Okay. Then what am I not going to believe?”

“I wanted to call you yesterday, but I had to work through it.”

Sue was even more confused. “Work through something with the captain?”

“Aaron.”

“Okay, Aaron.” Sue took a sip of her tea. “It’s still weird to think of him that way, I guess.”

“Yeah.” Jamie sat back in her chair and gripped the arms. “Wait till you hear this.”

Sue waited. The quieter she was, the better chance Jamie would get to the point. At that moment the girls came barreling down the stairs.

Katy skipped into the room, breathless and happy. Sierra was close on her heels. “Can we go outside and play?”

Sue looked at Jamie and caught her look of approval. She smiled at Katy and pointed to the closet. “Get your coat. It’s almost dark and the nights are getting colder now.”

“Yes, Mommy.”

Sierra raised her eyebrows at Jamie. “Me too?”

“Yes, silly. You too.” Jamie was clearly trying to keep her tone light.

When the girls were gone, Sue looked at Jamie. “So...?”

“Okay.” She breathed in slow through her nose. “Here’s what happened.” Jamie’s fingers came together. The tips of her knuckles were white. “Yesterday after working at St. Paul’s, Aaron and I went to Battery Park with our lunch. I didn’t think anything of it, I mean, at the time I didn’t, anyway. We eat out together all the time, especially after working at the chapel.”

Sue nodded. “All the time.”

“But yesterday there was something different in his eyes. I couldn’t put my finger on it while we were at St. Paul’s, but when we were sitting

on a bench at the park, watching the tourist boats in the harbor, I asked him about it.” Jamie paused. Her shoulders sank a notch, and the lines on her forehead grew more pronounced. “He told me he has feelings for me, Sue. That he could picture the two of us together some day, and that...that I should at least think about it.”

Relief flooded Sue’s veins. Relief and sorrow all at the same time. Her question to her friend was both kind and pointed. “Can you blame him, Jamie?”

Jamie leaned forward. Her eyes held an angst Sue had never seen there before. “Can I blame him?” She uttered a sound that fell short of a laugh. “I wasn’t sure whether to kick him or run for my life.”

Sue tried to picture her feisty friend having that reaction to Captain Hisel’s admission. “Jamie, you didn’t kick him!”

“No.” She bit the inside of her lip. “But I didn’t run, either.”

“Because...”

“Because maybe I didn’t want to run.” Her voice cracked. “And maybe that’s worse.”

Sue set her tea down. Her heart hurt for her friend. Moving on was going to be painful for both of them, but it was bound to come. Time would see to that. She reached out and took hold of Jamie’s knee. Her voice was just loud enough to hear. “Because maybe deep down you’ve considered the possibility yourself? Is that it?”

“I don’t know.” Jamie’s lower lip and chin quivered. “I don’t know, Sue. I only know that I feel this terrible guilt, as if I’m betraying Jake by even talking about this.”

For a long while, Sue said nothing. There were no rule books or guidelines about how to start living again. Some FDNY widows had already remarried, some not much more than a year after the attacks. Neither Sue nor Jamie could imagine moving on so quickly, but everyone handled grief differently.

And not everyone had a husband like Larry or Jake.



Sue tucked her feet beneath her up onto the chair and stared out the window. The girls were swinging, pushing their toes toward the sky and giggling all the while. She looked back at Jamie. “I’ve wondered about this, about whether I could ever even find another man attractive after Larry.”

Jamie massaged her temples. “You never told me.”

“It’s like you said, just mentioning the idea feels like a crime.”

“But when you do...” Jamie looked at the floor for a moment, and then back up at Sue. “When you do think about it, how do you usually end up feeling?”

Peace hugged Sue’s shoulders and settled in beside her. She spread her hands out before her and nodded toward little Larry and the girls in the backyard. “Like this is enough. My children, my memories. They’re all I need. At least for now, until God shows me something different.”

“What if that’s what He’s showing me?”

“Well...” Sue took hold of her tea again. She ran her fingers along the dewy moisture that had built up on the glass. “Do you, you know, do you feel anything when you’re with Capt—” She caught herself. “When you’re with Aaron?”

Jamie closed her eyes and scrunched her face. When she opened them she looked more bewildered than before. “Not really.” She lifted her hands from her lap and dropped them again. “But the idea of being more than friends isn’t altogether horrible, either.”

“Hmmm.”

“Yeah, I know.” She stood and paced across the room. For a few moments she watched little Larry make three baskets in a row. Then she came back and sat in her chair again. “No one ever teaches you how to do this.”

“No.”

“I’ve been thinking what would Jake want, and even there I’m not sure.” Jamie ran her finger around the rim of her iced tea glass, her eyes

distant. "He wouldn't want me alone, not for the rest of my life." She looked up. "But how could he want me with another man?"

"I've thought about that too." Sue's stomach turned. The conversation was as difficult for her as it was for Jamie. They hadn't wanted their marriages to end; they'd simply been cut short. And in their place was a void that even the best memories couldn't fill completely. "Of course Jake wouldn't want you to fall in love with someone else, not if he were here. But he isn't. He's gone, and so is Larry."

"But it feels so wrong, like they aren't really dead unless...until we move on with life, find someone new." Jamie's voice was thick with emotion. "You know?"

"Yes." Sue thought of something. "There is something else."

"What?"

"What's Aaron think of your faith?"

Jamie hesitated, but only for a minute. "He...he teases me about it, especially when I say I'm praying for him. He tells me there's no point."

"Hmmm. I didn't know that."

"Some of the guys at the department struggle with faith, at least that's what Aaron tells me. I hadn't thought much about that." She took a sip from her glass and looked at Sue over the rim. "Too busy trying to sort through my feelings, I guess."

Quiet came over them again. Sue wasn't sure what to say. She was certain a relationship with Aaron should never materialize as long as he didn't share Jamie's faith. But it was probably too soon to say anything. Still, she couldn't stay silent; her faith wouldn't allow it. She bit her tongue and tried to pick the right words.

After another minute, Jamie said, "I know what you're thinking."

"What?" Sue crossed her legs.

"You're thinking Aaron isn't a believer. Right?"

Sue pursed her lips. "Was it written on my forehead?"

"No." Jamie sank back into her chair. She sounded defeated. "In your

eyes.”

“I’m not saying I’m right, Jamie, but if I were you I’d keep his friendship and consider anything more a closed subject.”

“Except for one thing.”

“What?”

“Jake didn’t do that to me. He loved me despite my lack of faith...and look what happened.”

“You were kids when you met, that’s different.” Sue could’ve said more, but she didn’t want to push, not now. “God will make it all clear to you—however things work out.”

“Yes.” The lines on Jamie’s forehead eased completely and her eyes looked more peaceful. “I’ll keep you posted. I guess the whole discussion has made me wonder if it’s time to move on, to think of myself as single, not widowed.”

Sue smiled, the first time either of them had done so since they sat down. “Since you brought it up...”

“Brought what up?”

“Moving on.” Sue uncrossed her legs and slid to the edge of her chair. “Jamie, maybe it’s time you stopped working at St. Paul’s.”

Jamie’s eyes grew wide and her mouth hung open. “Quit St. Paul’s?” Jamie uttered a hard exhale and raked her fingers through her dark hair. “St. Paul’s and Sierra—that’s all that drives me, Sue. God’s given me those two as a reason to get up every morning, to keep existing even when I feel like I’m already dead.”

Sue put her hand on Jamie’s knee again. “But maybe that feeling is because of St. Paul’s, because you’re reminded of September 11 over and over again.”

“No.” Jamie gave a hard shake of her head. “It’s not because of St. Paul’s. That chapel gives me a way to keep Jake’s legacy alive, a way to help other people have faith and hope, the way Jake would’ve helped them if he were still alive. Every day I go there I feel a little better about myself,

my purpose in life. Even when I leave there exhausted.” Sue didn’t say anything; she didn’t have to. If Jamie was leaving St. Paul’s feeling emotionally drained, then maybe she would see it was time for a break. She’d said as much before, but Jamie was determined to stay at St. Paul’s. The place made her feel closer to Jake. Only Jamie could make the decision about leaving. “Okay.” Sue looked at the girls again. “I’ll ask you the same thing Aaron did.” She caught Jamie’s eyes again. “Just think about it.”

They were too close to argue, and even now Jamie didn’t seem frustrated by Sue’s request. Just certain. “The day it doesn’t feel like Jake’s up there smiling at me, I’ll turn in my notice, deal?”

“Deal.”

The conversation shifted to the girls, and Jamie admitted she was thinking of telling Sierra the truth about Jake’s death, and the fact that the man who had lived with them after September 11 hadn’t been Jake at all.

Before their conversation ended, they joined hands and prayed that God might give Jamie wisdom about how and what and when to tell Sierra. After dinner and a game of Uno with the kids, Jamie and Sierra headed home.

Sue tucked in Larry and then Katy. They had their own rooms, but most nights Katy liked sleeping on Larry’s top bunk.

“He likes company, Mommy,” Katy had told her. But the truth was something different. Since losing her father, Katy hated being alone. It was one more reminder that nothing would ever be the same again.

This time when Sue passed the photo of Larry, she didn’t feel any sharp reminders or rushes of sorrow. Instead she smiled back, and as she did she remembered something Jamie had said earlier that evening. The day it didn’t feel like Jake was up there smiling was the day she’d turn in her notice.

Jake was always smiling. He and Larry could’ve been brothers that way, even if they looked nothing alike. Sue could picture Jake smiling at

Jamie out on the water, flying over the harbor on her jet ski, or while taking Sierra to dance classes, even helping out at church.

But talking about what happened that Tuesday morning, over and over and over again?

No matter how hard she tried, Sue couldn't picture Jake Bryan smiling about that.

Sierra was trying to get to sleep, but she couldn't. Something Katy said while they were swinging made her stomach feel bouncy. Like the curls on Cinda May in her second-grade class. She did a big breath and rolled onto her side. "C'mere, Wrinkles. Where are you, boy?"

Wrinkles was her big gray cat. Sierra named him *Wrinkles* because when he was a little baby he had a wrinkly face. He slept in Sierra's room, but not always on her bed. Mommy said that was 'cause Wrinkles had an attitude. Most cats had attitudes, actually. "Wrinkles..." Sierra made her voice a loud whisper. Mommy thought she was sleeping, so she couldn't be loud. But she needed to talk to someone. Wrinkles was the only other person in the room.

Sierra heard a little meowing sound, and Wrinkles jumped onto the bed. He padded over with his soft cat feet and looked straight at her.

"Hi, Wrinkles." Sierra patted the cat's back. "Lay down."

Wrinkles pushed at the covers three times and then curled his legs beneath him. As soon as he was down, he started purring. Purring was when cats were happy; that was something else Mommy had told her.

"I'm glad you're happy, Wrinkles." Sierra rubbed her nose against the cat's tiny pink one. It was cold and wet like the morning grass. "Wrinkles, I'm feeling a little sick." She studied the cat. "You know, in my tummy. That kind."

Wrinkles leaned his head back and yawned. He yawned so big she could see the little prickly things on his tongue. When people yawned it meant they were bored, but not Wrinkles. When he yawned it meant he

wanted her to keep talking. That's what he always did when she talked to him at night.

"I'm gonna talk to Jesus about it before I go to sleep, but I thought I'd tell you first." Sierra sat up and folded her legs crisscross applesauce. "Wanna know what Katy said?" She waited. "She said it was weird that Daddy died in a building fire saving people because he was with her daddy in the Twin Towers and they never stayed apart." Her nose itched. She gave it a little scratch. "Doesn't that make you feel kind of sick, Wrinkles? Because if my daddy and Katy's daddy were together in the Twin Towers, how come they didn't die at the same time, actually? How come my daddy came home for a little while and then he died, huh?"

Wrinkles looked at her, but only for a few seconds. Then he began licking his skinny legs. Sierra liked when he did that. The way his tongue was all bristly, licking his fur was kind of like combing it. But the trouble with Wrinkles was, he didn't have a lot to say. He didn't have anything to say, really.

And this was the sort of problem that needed words on the other side. Words from someone who could help her understand. Otherwise Katy was right; it was weird.

Sierra did a yawn, almost as big as the one Wrinkles did. She lay back down, careful not to wake up her cat. Then she pulled the covers up to her chin, closed her eyes, and thought about it again. If her daddy and Katy's daddy were together, why didn't they die together? She squeezed her eyes shut very hard and tried to remember.

Daddy was hurt, because she remembered him in the hospital. Then he came home and he slept downstairs. Sierra remembered that too. At first he didn't know things—like where he was or who people were, actually. But then he started 'membering and doing all the things Daddy always did. Like curl her hair and make her blueberry pancakes and watch *Little Mermaid* with her.

Then one day he was gone.

Mommy said he was helping people in a fire when Jesus called him home to heaven. And that made pretty much sense, except for now Katy thought it was weird.

Sleep was coming to get her; she could feel it. She did another yawn and thought about Jesus. She liked talking to Him out loud, because you talked to real people that way. And Jesus was very real.

“Hi, Jesus, it’s me, Sierra.”

Wrinkles snuggled a little closer to her.

“I’m up late tonight because my tummy hurts. Well—“ she opened her eyes and saw the room was shadowy dark—“it doesn’t really hurt, it just feels bouncy, actually. And it’s all because of what Katy said. First it was weird that my daddy didn’t die at the same time as her daddy because they were both in the Twin Towers together.” She scratched the tip of her nose again. “But something else, too. She said they found our two daddies’ helmets at the same time. At the very same time, Jesus. Isn’t that weird?”

Sierra’s tummy started to feel a little less bouncy. That always happened when she talked to Jesus. One time Katy asked her if she was mad at Jesus for taking their daddies home too soon. Sierra had to think about that for a long time, but she decided no. She wasn’t mad. Sometimes people die—that’s what Mommy said. She couldn’t be mad at Jesus for that because guess what? Jesus was taking care of Daddy right now. So how could she be mad?

She closed her eyes again. “Jesus, I think I’ll talk to Mommy about it, okay? She’ll know what to tell Katy, plus she can tell me about the helmets. If it’s even true.” Sleep was coming faster now. “Good night, Jesus. Tell my daddy I love him.”

## Vyf

Sue is besig om vinnig deur die huis te loop en alles reg te trek voordat Jamie opdaag. Dis toe sy verby ’n foto van Larry loop dat dit haar tref. Drie jaar het verbygegaan sedert sy dood. Drie lang jare.

Die herdenking van 11 September bied haar nie tyd om stil te raak nie, maar soms – soos nou – hoor sy Larry se hartlike lag of kry sy die vae geur van sy naskeermiddel van waar dit steeds onaangeraak in die badkamer staan. Soms is daar iets wat 'n herinnering aktiveer, wat maak dat sy haar man se dierbare gesig voor haar sien – en dan word sy opnuut deur die reuse verlies getref.

Dit gebeur deesdae al hoe minder, en dit op sigself is 'n pynlike realiteit. Hoe durf haar verstand en hart en siel sonder hom aanbeweeg, sonder die lewe wat hulle geken en liefgehad het? Hulle het twee kinders, en af en toe sal iets wat die sewejarige Katy kwytraak of die manier waarop klein Larry – nog nie heeltemal vier nie – sy een vingertjie vir haar lig, nes Larry altyd gedoen het, die verlies skerp laat opvlam.

Hierdie keer is dit die foto. Dit voel asof Larry tot in haar hart sien. Dit laat haar in haar spore vassteek en vereis van haar om hier, nou, alles te onthou wat hy was en alles te onthou wat sy verloor het. Sy trek haar asem vinnig in en hou aan die rand van die toonbank vas waarop die foto staan.

*Larry ... ek het nie vergeet nie.*

Sy kyk na sy gesig, na die vonkeling in sy oë, en probeer onthou hoe daardie selfde gesig geleef het wanneer hy geglimlag en gepraat en met haar liefde gemaak het. Die herinneringe is besig om te vervaag, en daar is niks wat sy daaraan kan doen nie. Die tyd is besig om elke dag 'n bietjie meer daarvan te steel.

Die voordeurklokkie bring haar terug na die hede toe.

Jamie het 'n week laas kom inloer en Sue mis haar vreeslik. Sedert 11 September is hulle nader as susters aan mekaar. Hulle praat oor hulle kinders – Katy en Sierra is nog steeds beste maatjies – en alles waarmee hulle hul daaglikse besig hou. Maar hoofsaaklik praat hulle oor die verlede, oor die gelukkige oomblikke en herinneringe wat onmoontlik sal oorleef as hulle nie elke nou en dan opgediep word nie.

Haar vriendskap met Jamie is 'n geskenk van God. 'n Veilige hawe, 'n plek waar hulle volkome kwesbaar kan wees, ongeag die feit dat die wêreld van hulle verwag om aan te beweeg. En in hierdie hawe het Sue en Jamie elkeen 'n vriendin ontdek waarvan hulle 'n leeftyd gedroom het.

Sy kyk vir oulaas na Larry se foto en roep oor haar skouer. “Ek’s nou daar ...”

Dis vieruur die middag en dit beteken dat Sierra by Jamie sal wees. Die dogtertjies kan nie wag om te speel nie, en op sulke dae – wanneer die son mildelik skyn en die winter nog ver voel – kan hulle buite agter die huis gaan speel, van kleins af hulle gunstelingspeelplek.

Nes Jamie, woon Sue ook in 'n huis op Staten Island. Hier is die erwe groter as in die stad, en die eiland maak dat hulle nie deur die stadsgewoel van Manhattan geraak word nie. Sy maak die deur oop en glimlag vir Jamie. “Ek het jou gemis, vriendin. Een kuier 'n week raak te min!”

Jamie gee haar 'n drukkie. “Ek weet. Ek het onttrekkingsimptome begin kry.” Sierra kom in, haar blonde hare soos 'n gordyn oor haar skouertjies. “Hallo,



tannie Sue. Is Katy in haar kamer?”

“Ja, my skat.” Sy gee vir Sierra ’n drukkie. “Sy wag vir jou.”

“Dankie.” Op pad boontoe steek sy vas om oor klein Larry se hare te streel.

“Hallo, Larry. Wat doen jy?”

Die seuntjie dra ’n miniatuur-basketbaltruitjie en het ’n bal onder sy een arm vasgeknyp. “Ek speel basketbal.”

Larry se klein plastiekbasketbalring is in die woonkamer staangemaak, tussen ’n rusbank en ’n tweesitplekbankie. Sue gee nie om dat die seuntjie in die huis speel nie. Die kind is feitlik verslaaf aan die sportsoort; solank hy ’n bal by hom het, is hy gelukkig. En as hy gelukkig is, kan sy en Jamie sonder onderbreking gesels.

Sierra verdwyn en Sue wys na ’n stiller sithoekie van waar hulle Larry steeds kan dophou sonder om deur los balle getref te word. Sue het ystee gemaak, en twee lang glase staan op ’n koffietafel.

Jamie is stiller as gewoonlik. Sy gaan sit op een van die leunstoele, rus met haar elmboë op die armleunings en laat sak haar gesig in haar hande. Na ’n oomblik laat val sy haar hande op haar skoot en kyk sy na Sue. “Ek wou vroeër gekom het, maar Sierra het my gesmeek om te wag totdat sy van die skool af kom.” Jamie se stem is ernstig en daar is fyn kommerplooitjies langs haar oë. Sy plooi haar mond en kyk reguit na Sue. “Jy gaan my nie glo nie.”

Sue gaan sit op die stoel naaste aan haar vriendin en probeer geïnteresseerd lyk. “Iets by St. Paul’s?” Jamie begin hulle gesprekke amper altyd met iets wat by St. Paul’s gebeur het. Daar was ’n tyd dat Sue niks meer wou hê as om by die klein kapelletjie te wees nie. Maande lank sou sy met graagte elke dag na St. Paul’s toe wou gaan om na die mure vol herinneringe en aandenkings te kyk, om vir ’n uur of wat voor te gee dat die mense wat daardie dag gesneuwel het, nog lewe. Maar sy het dit nooit oorweeg om as vrywilliger daar te werk nie.

Sy is bekommerd oor Jamie. Dis een ding om vir ’n bepaalde tyd by die kerkie te gaan uithelp. Maar Jamie werk drie, soms vier dae ’n week sedert die kapel ’n jaar ná die aanval vir die publiek oopgestel is.

Jamie skud haar kop; haar gesig is strak en bleek. “Nie St. Paul’s nie. Kaptein Hisel.”

“Kaptein Hisel?” Sue trek haar neus op ’n plooi. Jamie en die kaptein is vriende; almal weet dit. Sue se hart mis ’n slag terwyl sy vir die nuus wag. “Is hy oukei?”

“Ja.” Sy knik vinnig. “Hy makeer niks nie.”

Sue ontspan weer. Dis een ding van 11 September. Voor daardie dag was Sue vaagweg bewus van tragedies; nou is dit amper asof sy dit op ’n morbiede soort manier verwag. Asof die houe van die lewe dan minder fel sal wees. “Oukei. Wat sal ek nie glo nie?”

“Ek wou jou gister bel, maar ek moes eers daardeur werk.”

Sue verstaan nou nog minder. “Moes jy saam met die kaptein deur iets werk?”

“Aaron.”

“Oukei, Aaron.” Sue neem ’n slukkie van haar tee. “Dis nog steeds vreemd vir my om so aan hom te dink.”

“Ja.” Jamie sit agteroor en laat sak haar hande op die stoel se armleunings. “Wag tot jy dit hoor.”

Sue wag. Hoe stiller sy is, hoe groter is die kans dat Jamie tot die punt gaan kom. Op daardie oomblik hoor sy die dogtertjies babbelend ondertoe kom.

Katy kom uitasem en gelukkig by die vertrek ingestorm. Sierra is op haar hakke. “Kan ons buite gaan speel?”

Toe Sue sien dat dit Jamie se goedkeuring wegdra, glimlag sy vir Katy en wys na die kas. “Jy moet net jou jas aantrek. Dis amper donker en die aande raak koud.”

“Ja, Mamma.”

Sierra kyk met opgetrekte wenkbroue na Jamie. “Ek ook?”

“Natuurlik, klein klits. Jy ook.” Dis duidelik dat Jamie haar stem probeer lig hou.

Toe die dogtertjies uit is, kyk Sue na Jamie. “En ... ?”

“Oukei.” Sy trek haar asem stadig in. “Dis wat gebeur het.” Jamie vleg haar vingers inmekaar. Haar kneukels is wit. “Nadat ons by St. Paul’s gewerk het, het ek en Aaron wegneemkos gaan kry en Battery Park toe gegaan. Ek het niks daarin gelees nie, ek bedoel, nie op daardie tydstip nie, in elk geval. Ons eet gereeld saam, veral wanneer ons klaar by die kapel gewerk het.”

Sue knik. “Ek weet.”

“Maar gister was daar iets anders aan hom. By die kapel kon ek nie my vinger daarop lê nie, maar toe ons op die bankie in die park sit, het ek hom daarvoor uitgevra.” Jamie bly stil. Haar skouers val effens en daar is ’n frons op haar voorkop. “Hy het vir my gesê dat hy gevoelens vir my het, Sue. Dat hy ons eendag saam sien en dat ... dat ek ten minste daarvoor moet dink.”

Die verligting spoel deur Sue. Verligting en terselfdertyd hartseer. Haar vraag aan haar vriendin is sag sowel as nadruklik. “Kan jy hom kwalik neem, Jamie?”

Jamie leun vooroor. Daar is ’n angstigtheid in haar oë wat Sue nog nooit voorheen gesien het nie. “Kan ek hom kwalik neem?” Sy maak ’n geluid wat nie heeltemal ’n lag is nie. “Ek het nie geweet of ek hom wou skop of weghardloop nie.”

Sue probeer haar die vurige Jamie se reaksie op kaptein Hisel se bekentenis voorstel. “Jamie, jy het hom nie geskop nie!”

“Nee.” Sy byt die binnekant van haar lip. “Maar ek het ook nie wegghardloop nie.”

“Omdat ... ”

“Omdat ek dalk nie wil hardloop nie.” Haar stem is skor. “En dalk is dit erger.”

Sue sit haar glas neer. Haar hart gaan uit na haar vriendin. Om aan te beweeg, gaan vir hulle albei ’n pynlike proses wees, maar dit sal die een of ander tyd moet gebeur. Tyd sal daarvoor sorg. Sy steek haar hand uit en raak aan Jamie

se knie. Haar stem is net-net hoorbaar. “Dink jy dis omdat jy dalk diep in jou binneste self aan die moontlikheid gedink het?”

“Ek weet nie.” Jamie se ken bewe. “Ek weet nie, Sue. Ek weet net dat ek hierdie verskriklike skuldgevoelens het, asof ek Jake verloën deur net hieroor te praat.”

Sue bly ’n hele ruk lank stil. Daar is nie handleidings of riglyne oor hoe om weer te begin lewe nie. Sommige van die brandweer-weduwees is weer getroud, sommige kwalik meer as ’n jaar ná die aanvalle. Nie Sue of Jamie kon hulle indink om so gou aan te beweeg nie, maar nie almal hanteer hulle smart dieselfde nie.

En nie almal het ’n man soos Larry of Jake gehad nie.

Sue trek haar voete onder haar in en kyk deur die venster. Die dogtertjies is besig om giggelend te swaai, hulle tone boontoe gestrek. Sy kyk weer na Jamie. “Ek het al daaraan gedink, of ek ooit weer vir ’n man sal kan lief word ná Larry.”

Jamie vryf oor haar slape. “Jy het my nooit gesê nie.”

“Dis soos jy sê, net om daaroor te praat, voel soos verraad.”

“Maar wanneer jy ... ” Jamie kyk vir ’n oomblik na die vloer en dan weer na Sue. “Wanneer jy daaraan dink, hoe voel jy gewoonlik?”

Sue raak van ’n diep vrede bewus. Sy lig haar hande en knik na klein Larry en die dogtertjies in die agterplaas. “Dat dit genoeg is. My kinders, my herinneringe. Ek het niks meer nodig nie. Vir eers is dit genoeg, totdat God vir my iets anders wys.”

“Sê nou dis wat Hy vir my wys?”

“Wel ... ” Sue neem weer ’n slukkie van haar tee en vee haar vingers oor die koel nattigheid aan die buitekant van die glas. “Voel jy, jy weet, voel jy enigiets wanneer jy by kap.. – ” Sy keer haarself. “Wanneer jy by Aaron is?”

Jamie maak haar oë toe en trek haar hele gesig op ’n plooi. Toe sy haar oë weer oopmaak, lyk sy meer verwilderd as voorheen. “Nie regtig nie.” Sy tel haar hande op en laat val hulle weer op haar skoot. “Maar die idee om meer as net vriende te wees, is ook nie afstootlik nie.”

“Hmmm.”

“Ja, ek weet.” Sy staan op en loop na die oorkant van die vertrek. Vir ’n oomblik kyk sy hoe klein Larry drie doele in ’n ry gooi. Dan kom sy terug en gaan sit weer op haar stoel. “Niemand leer ’n mens ooit hoe dit werk nie.”

“Nee.”

“Ek probeer dink wat Jake sou wou hê, en selfs daaroor is ek nie seker nie.”

Jamie se wysvinger sirkel rondom die borand van die glas, ’n veraf kyk in haar oë. “Hy sou nie wou hê dat ek alleen moet wees nie, nie vir die res van my lewe nie.” Sy kyk op. “Maar hoe kan hy wil hê dat ek by ’n ander man moet wees?”

“Ek het ook al daaraan gedink.” Sue se maag draai. Die gesprek is vir haar net so moeilik soos vir Jamie. Hulle wou nie hê dat hulle huwelike beëindig word nie; dis eenvoudig afgesny. En vervang met ’n leegheid wat nie eens deur die

mooiste herinneringe heeltemal gevul kan word nie. “Natuurlik sou Jake nie wou hê dat jy op iemand anders verlief raak nie, nie as hy hier was nie. Maar hy is nie. Hy is weg, hy en Larry.”

“Maar dit voel so verkeerd, asof hulle nie regtig dood is, tensy ... voordat ons aanbeweeg met ons lewe en iemand anders ontmoet nie.” Jamie se stem is emosiebelaai. “Verstaan jy?”

“Ja.” Sue dink aan iets. “Jamie, daar is nog iets.”

“Wat?”

“Wat dink Aaron van jou geloof?”

Jamie aarsel, maar net vir ’n paar sekondes. “Hy ... hy terg my daaroor, veral wanneer ek sê dat ek vir hom bid. Hy sê dit maak nie ’n verskil nie.”

“Hmmm. Ek het dit nie geweet nie.”

“Aaron sê party van die ouens by die brandweer het ’n stryd met geloof. Ek het nie regtig veel daaraan gedink nie.” Sy neem ’n sluk van haar tee en kyk na Sue bo-oor die rand van haar glas. “Ek dink ek was te besig met my eie emosies.”

Dit raak weer stil tussen hulle. Sue is nie seker wat sy moet sê nie. Sy dink nie Jamie moet ernstig by Aaron betrokke raak terwyl hy nie haar geloof deel nie. Maar dis waarskynlik te vroeg om enigiets te sê. Tog kan sy nie stilbly nie; haar geloof laat haar nie toe nie. Sy byt op haar tong terwyl sy na die regte woorde soek.

Na nog ’n paar oomblikke sê Jamie: “Ek weet wat jy dink.”

“Wat?” Sy kruis haar bene.

“Jy dink Aaron is nie ’n Christen nie. Nê?”

Sue pers haar lippe opmekaar. “Het dit op my voorkop geskryf gestaan?”

“Nee.” Jamie sak terug op haar stoel. Sy klink verslane. “In jou oë.”

“Ek sê nie ek’s reg nie, Jamie, maar as ek jy is, sal ek sy vriendin bly en nie verder betrokke raak nie.”

“Dis net ... ”

“Wat?”

“Dis nie wat Jake gedoen het nie. Hy het my liefgehad al was ek nie ’n Christen nie ... en kyk wat het gebeur.”

“Julle was kinders toe julle ontmoet het, dis anders.” Sue kan meer sê, maar sy wil nie druk op Jamie plaas nie, nie nou nie. “Die Here sal alles vir jou duidelik maak – hoe dinge ook al uitwerk.”

“Ja.” Jamie se frons is weg en sy lyk meer ontspanne. “Ek sal jou op hoogte hou. Die hele gesprek het my laat wonder of dit tyd is om aan te beweeg, om aan myself as ’n enkellopende te dink, nie ’n weduwee nie.”

Sue glimlag vir die eerste keer sedert hulle kom sit het. “Noudat jy dit noem ... ”

“Wat noem?”

“Aanbeweeg.” Sue skuif tot op die punt van haar stoel. “Jamie, dalk is dit tyd dat jy klaarmaak by St. Paul’s.”

Jamie se oë rek en haar mond hang oop. “Klaarmaak by St. Paul’s?” Jamie

blaas haar asem hard uit en trek haar vingers deur haar donker hare. “St. Paul’s en Sierra – dis al wat my aan die gang hou, Sue. God het hulle twee vir my as ’n rede gegee om soggens op te staan en aan te hou lewe wanneer dit voel of ek alreeds dood is.”

Sue plaas haar hand weer op Jamie se knie. “Maar dalk is dit St. Paul’s wat jou so laat voel. Daar word jy die hele tyd aan 11 September herinner.”

“Nee.” Jamie skud haar kop heftig. “Dis nie St. Paul’s nie. Daardie kapel gee my ’n manier om Jake se werk voort te sit, ’n manier om ander mense te help om geloof en hoop te hê. Dis wat hy sou doen as hy nog gelewe het. Elke dag wanneer ek soontoe gaan, voel ek ’n klein bietjie beter oor myself, my doel in die lewe. Selfs al is ek gedaan wanneer ek daar weggaan.”

Sue sê niks nie; sy hoef nie. As Jamie emosioneel gedreineer is wanneer sy van St. Paul’s af kom, sal sy miskien insien dat dit tyd is om klaar te maak. Sy het die onderwerp al voorheen aangeraak, maar Jamie was nog altyd vasberade om by St. Paul’s aan te bly. Die plek laat haar nader aan Jake voel. Jamie is die enigste een wat daardie besluit kan neem. “Oukei.” Sue kyk weer na die dogtertjies. “Dink net daaroor.”

Hulle is te na aan mekaar om te argumenteer, en selfs nou lyk Jamie nie vies oor Sue se versoek nie. Net beslis. “Die dag wanneer dit nie voel of Jake nie vanuit die hemel vir my glimlag nie, sal ek kennis gee. Tevrede?”

“Tevrede.”

Die gesprek dwaal na die dogtertjies, en Jamie erken dat sy daaraan dink om Sierra van Jake se dood te vertel, en van die feit dat die man wat ná 11 September by hulle gebly het, nie haar pa was nie.

Voordat hulle klaar gesels het, neem hulle hande en bid dat die Here Jamie die wysheid sal gee oor hoe en wanneer om vir Sierra te vertel. Nadat hulle geëet en Uno saam met die kinders gespeel het, gaan Jamie en Sierra huis toe.

Sue gaan sit vir Larry in die bed, en toe vir Katy. Hulle het hulle eie kamers, maar Katy wil die meeste aande bokant Larry op sy dubbeldekkerbed slaap.

“Hy hou daarvan om nie alleen te wees nie, Mamma,” het Katy vir haar gesê. Maar dis nie heeltemal die waarheid nie. Sedert haar pa se dood haat Katy dit om alleen te wees. Dis nog ’n bevestiging dat niks ooit weer dieselfde gaan wees nie.

Toe Sue hierdie keer verby Larry se foto loop, ervaar sy nie dieselfde steekpyn of hartseer nie. Sy glimlag terug vir hom, en dan onthou sy iets wat Jamie vroeër die aand gesê het. Die dag wanneer dit nie voel of Jake vanuit die hemel vir haar glimlag nie, sal sy kennis gee.

Jake het altyd geglimlag. In daardie opsig was hy en Larry soos broers, selfs al het hulle glad nie eenders gelyk nie. Sue is seker Jake glimlag vir Jamie wanneer sy op haar waterponie oor die water vlieg of wanneer sy Sierra na haar dansklasse toe vat, selfs wanneer sy by die kerk uithelp.

Maar om oor en oor en oor te praat oor wat daardie Dinsdagoggend gebeur het?

Maak nie saak hoe hard sy probeer nie, Sue kan nie dink dat Jake Bryan

daaroor glimlag nie.

Sierra kan nie aan die slaap raak nie. Katy het iets gesê toe hulle geswaai het wat haar maag sommer snaaks laat voel het. Soos pienk spookasem. Sy haal diep asem en draai op haar sy. “Kom hierso, Wrinkles. Waar is jy nou al weer?”

Wrinkles is haar groot, grys kat. Sierra het hom Wrinkles genoem omdat hy so 'n verkreukelde gesiggie gehad het toe hy 'n babakattjie was. Hy slaap in Sierra se kamer, maar nie altyd op haar bed nie. Mamma sê dis omdat Wrinkles opstêrs is. Die meeste katte is eintlik maar opstêrs.

“Wrinkles ... ” Sierra fluister op haar hardste. Mamma dink sy slaap al; daarom moet sy sag praat. Maar sy moet met iemand praat. Wrinkles is die enigste ander iemand in die kamer.

Sierra hoor 'n katstemmetjie en toe spring Wrinkles op haar bed. Hy kom op sy sagte pootjies nader en kyk reguit na haar.

“Haai, Wrinkles.” Sy vryf oor haar kat se rug. “Kom lê.”

Wrinkles pomp-pomp die komberse en vou dan sy voetjies onder hom in. Toe hy sy lê gekry het, begin hy spin. Katte spin as hulle gelukkig is; dis nog iets wat Mamma vir haar gesê het.

“Ek's bly jy's gelukkig, Wrinkles.” Sierra vryf met haar neus teen die kat se klein pienk neusie. Dis koud en nat soos die gras vroegoggend. “Wrinkles, ek voel so nie lekker nie.” Sy kyk na die kat. “My maag voel snaakserig.”

Wrinkles gaap. Hy gaap so groot dat sy die klein skurwe goedjies op sy tong kan sien. As mense gaap, beteken dit hulle is verveeld, maar nie Wrinkles nie. As hy gaap, beteken dit hy wil hê sy moet aanhou praat. Dis wat hy altyd doen wanneer sy in die aand met hom praat.

“Ek gaan met Jesus daarvoor praat voordat ek slaap, maar ek het gedink ek wil eers vir jou vertel.” Sierra kom orent en sit kruisbeen. “Weet jy wat het Katy gesê?” Sy wag. “Sy sê dis weird dat Pappa in 'n gebou dood is toe hy mense in die brand gehelp het, want hy was saam met haar pappa in die torings en hulle het altyd bymekaar gebly.” Haar neus jeuk en sy vryf dit gou. “Laat dit jou nie ook snaakserig voel nie, Wrinkles? Want as my pappa en Katy se pappa saam in die torings was, hoekom het hulle nie op dieselfde tyd doodgegaan nie? Hoekom het my pappa vir 'n rukkjie huis toe gekom en eers later doodgegaan, hè?”

Wrinkles kyk na haar, maar net vir 'n paar sekondes. Dan begin hy sy bene was. Sierra hou daarvan as hy dit doen. Dis amper asof hy sy pels met sy raspertongetjie kam. Maar die probleem met Wrinkles is dat hy nie baie te sê het nie. Eintlik praat hy glad nie.

En hierdie probleem van haar het iemand se woorde nodig. Woorde van iemand wat haar kan help om te verstaan. Anders is Katy reg, dan is dit weird. Sierra gaap en haar mond gaan amper so groot oop soos Wrinkles s'n. Sy gaan lê weer op haar rug, stadig sodat sy nie haar kat pla nie. Dan trek sy die komberse tot onder haar ken, maak haar oë toe en dink weer daarvoor. As haar pappa en Katy se pappa saam was, hoekom het hulle nie saam doodgegaan

nie? Sy knyp haar oë baie styf toe en probeer om te onthou.

Pappa het seergekry, want sy onthou dat hy in die hospitaal was. Toe het hy huis toe gekom en in die onderste kamer geslaap. Sierra kan dit ook goed onthou. Aan die begin het hy niks geweet nie – soos waar hy was of wie die mense was nie. Maar toe het hy begin onthou en weer alles gedoen wat pappa altyd gedoen het. Hy het haar hare ingedraai en plaatkoekies gemaak en *The Little Mermaid* saam met haar gekyk.

Toe het hy doodgegaan.

Mamma het gesê dat hy mense in 'n gebou gehelp het toe Jesus hom hemel toe gevat het. En dit het nog altyd vir haar sin gemaak. Maar nou dink Katy dis weird.

Sy is besig om aan die slaap te raak; sy kan dit voel. Sy gaap weer en dink aan Jesus. Sy hou daarvan om in haar gewone stem met hom te praat, want dit is hoe 'n mens met regte mense praat. En Jesus is regtig.

“Hallo, Jesus, dis ek, Sierra.”

Wrinkles lê 'n bietjie nader aan haar.

“Ek kan nie slaap nie, want my maag is seer. Wel ...” Sy maak haar oë oop en sien dat die kamer darem heeltemal donker is, “hy is nie regtig seer nie, hy voel net 'n bietjie wollerig. En dis oor wat Katy op die swaai gesê het. Eers sê sy dis weird dat Pappa nie saam met haar pappa dood is nie, want hulle was saam in die torings.” Sy vryf weer oor die punt van haar neus. “Maar daar is nog iets. Sy sê hulle het ons twee pappas se helms op dieselfde tyd gekry. Op dieselfde dag, Jesus. Dis ook weird.”

Sierra se maag voel nie meer so erg snaaks nie. Dit gebeur altyd wanneer sy met Jesus praat. Eenkeer het Katy vir haar gevra of sy kwaad is vir Jesus omdat Hy hulle pappas te gou hemel toe gevat het. Sierra moes eers lank dink, maar toe het sy besluit die antwoord is nee. Sy is nie kwaad nie. Partykeer gaan mense dood – dis wat Mamma sê. Sy kan nie vir Jesus kwaad wees nie, want raai wat? Jesus kyk nou baie mooi na Pappa. So hoe kan sy kwaad wees? Sy maak haar oë weer toe. “Jesus, ek dink ek moet met Mamma praat, oukei? Sy sal weet wat om vir Katy te sê, en dan kan sy my van die helms vertel. Dalk is dit net 'n storie.” Die slaap kom nou al hoe vinniger. “Nag, Jesus. Sê vir Pappa ek is lief vir hom.”

## Chapter SIX

Clay was at the wheel of his Ford pickup, heading for Eric and Laura's house. They wanted to have him over for dinner before he left. He stopped at a light and leaned back, adjusting his sunglasses. Now that he'd made up his mind to go, he couldn't wait to get out of Los Angeles.

Eric teased him that he'd freeze to death. Southern California winters rarely dipped below seventy degrees, whereas Manhattan would most likely be buried in snow by mid-December. Clay didn't care. In three days, he and Reynolds would be on the flight bound for LaGuardia and a three-week stay in New York City. Three weeks. It felt like an eternity, and that was a good thing.

New scenery, new people, new challenges. All of it would take his mind off the bucket of things that had been bothering him. The light turned green, and he took a quick lead away from the pack of cars. He was five minutes late and he didn't want to hold up dinner.

But he didn't exactly want to go, either.

The whole thing with Laura was ridiculous, really. She'd never been more than a friend, and the fact that she was happily married to his brother was nothing but good. At least, that's how he wanted to feel. If only he could meet the right person, someone who would fill that yearning in his heart for love and companionship. Someone to laugh with and pray with, someone to walk alongside in faith, one who he could play tennis with and watch ESPN with late at night.

Did people pity him when they saw him out by himself? Eating out alone, shopping alone, seeing a movie by himself. He hated the looks from strangers. Often they came from women—attractive women, even—who let their look linger awhile. The questions were written on their faces. What was a guy like him doing alone, first of all, and was he interested in company?

Another red light. Clay came to a hurried stop and gritted his teeth.



He wasn't interested. Not at all. He'd tried that route and nothing but awkward meetings had come from it. Guys from the station tried to set him up more times than he could remember, either with a sister or a friend of their own wife or girlfriend.

"You're a good-looking guy, Michaels," Reynolds told him once. "But you'd think you had three eyes and horns growing out of your head the way you can't keep a girl."

Clay had laughed. "Thanks, buddy. I needed that."

The trouble wasn't with him or the girls. They were generally young and beautiful and fun to be with. Los Angeles had no shortage of pretty women. The shortage was in women of faith. Women who believed the way he did, who saw faith in Christ not as a religion but as a relationship with the Creator.

He'd be out on a blind date, or at a barbecue where one of the guys was trying to set him up, and he'd say something about his job being a blessing or how he was sure God had a plan for people, and the girl would go slack-faced.

"Do you...go to church anywhere?"

Blank stare. "Church? You mean, like religion." The girl would offer a polite smile. "I'm not very religious."

Of course not. After three years of such exchanges, Clay wondered if there was even one single woman in Los Angeles who cared about the things he did. They were out there, of course. But he worked so many nights and weekends, he had a hard time connecting with a church group. When he could, he attended Sunday services at a growing church not far from his home—West Valley Christian. But he hadn't had time for any of the weekly groups, and so far he hadn't met single women his age.

The light turned green. He worked his way into the right lane and turned at the first street. Eric and Laura lived in a beautiful subdivision a few minutes up the hill and past a gated entry. He used to love seeing them, visiting with Eric and Laura, and spending time with Josh. But lately when

he visited he couldn't wait to leave.

That's why the trip to New York would be so good for him.

He pulled into the driveway, made his way up the sidewalk, and knocked once before letting himself in. Josh saw him first, through the foyer from the kitchen table where he was sitting, working over a textbook.

"Uncle Clay, hey, guess what?" The boy was tall like his father, sandy hair, with the same blue eyes. He had Laura's fine bone structure, but little else.

"Hey, buddy." Clay set his keys on a table near the door and headed toward him. "What's up?"

Josh pushed back from the table and grinned. "I made the A team!"

"Your first year at middle school?" Clay gave the boy a high five. "You'll be playing at UCLA before you know it!"

"You think so?" His eyes grew wider, excitement sparkling. "The Bruins are the best."

"Just wait till they've got you on the team. Then they'll really be something."

Clay took a few steps closer and looked at the textbook. The page was a smattering of geometrical shapes. "Math, huh?"

Josh's tone fell. "Yeah, the worst."

"Need some help?"

"No." Josh nodded his head toward the back door. "Dad helped me when I got home from school. I get it." He gave Clay a crooked grin. "I just hate it, that's all."

There it was again. The reminder that this family was perfectly fine without him. Josh no longer needed him for homework or playing catch or an hour of jump shots outside. Eric took care of all that now.

And Laura...obviously she didn't need him. He was her friend, but they spent no time alone together, nor did they have any reason to do so. This was the new way of things. After three years, it wasn't even all that new anymore.

Eric worked from home. He maintained the same type of job, the same income, the same membership to the country club, while spending ten times as many hours with Laura and Josh. It was the type of miracle setup only God could've worked out.

The sliding door opened, and Clay turned to see Eric walk in with an empty platter. "Barbecue's on." He smiled first at Clay, then at Josh. "How's it coming?"

"Okay." Josh made a face. "I wish I was done."

"Why don't you take a break?" Eric set the platter on the vast granite island at the center of the kitchen. "You can help me cook the steaks."

"You mean turn 'em and everything?"

"Yep." Eric chuckled. "Mom's out there finding zucchini. You can help her till I get back out."

Josh didn't hesitate. He pushed his chair away from the table and ran out the door, gangly legs flying beneath him. Clay leaned against the counter and watched, amazed. How much happier and at peace with the world Josh was now that things were different at home. Further proof of what he already knew—the unequaled power of a good father in a boy's life.

Their own father had checked out long before Clay and Eric were teenagers. The man didn't divorce their mother until they were in high school, but by then they barely knew him. Neither he nor his brother had been in touch with him in the years since.

Clay shifted his lower jaw. *That's why I want to be a dad, God...so I can be the kind of father a child wants. The way Eric is with Josh.* He gritted his teeth. *Why's it taking so long?*

Eric popped open a Sprite and slid it across the counter to Clay. "You okay?"

"Huh?" Clay straightened himself. "Yeah. Fine."

"You look a little pensive."

"Nah, I'm fine." He wasn't, but Eric didn't need to know that. His

older brother wasn't to blame for any of the feelings that had been poking at him lately. "Need help with dinner?"

"No, it's under control." Eric took a pop for himself and came up alongside Clay. "So..." He put the can down and crossed his arms. "How did it feel?"

How did it feel? Then it hit him. Of course...Eric was talking about the shooting. That's why all the questions. Clay shrugged. "Like target practice, I guess."

"Really?" Eric narrowed his eyes. "No difference?"

"Of course it was different." Clay uttered a sharp laugh and gave a sideways shake of his head. "The guy was spraying an AK-47 at me, and I was shooting from the floor of my patrol car. And instead of ripping some paper target, I killed a guy."

Eric's tone grew softer. "It was self-defense, Clay. Obviously."

"I know." He downed half of his pop and set the can back on the counter. "I was sick about it at first, but the truth was, I had no choice. It was me or him."

"How'd you fire at him without getting hit?"

Clay shrugged. "Same way you found your way home after September 11?" Clay loved this, the easy banter with his brother. For all the ways he was tempted to be jealous of him, he couldn't do anything but enjoy their time together.

Eric nodded, but he didn't answer the question; he didn't have to. They both knew the reason they were standing there that October afternoon. God alone got the credit.

"Josh says he made the A team."

"Yeah." Eric chuckled. "He has me playing better hoops than I did when I was a college boy." He shot an invisible ball toward the patio door. "The kid can't get enough."

"I'll have to catch a few games when I get back."

Eric's smile faded. "So what's this I hear about you spending three

weeks in New York?"

"The idea came from Reynolds, one of the detectives at the station. I have three weeks paid while they investigate the shooting. I can also count it as training."

"Training?" Eric gave him a knowing look. "You mean you finally got your promotion?"

"Yeah." Clay gripped the countertop behind him. "Funny timing, huh? Kill a suspect in a shootout, come back to the office, and find out they've made you detective."

"Hey!" Eric slapped him on the back. "Way to go, little brother. You've had that coming for a few years at least." He hesitated. "But why New York? Couldn't you get training here?"

"Sure." Clay pulled away from the counter and stretched first to one side, then the other. He'd pulled a few muscles in his back when he jerked his body to the floorboard during the gunfight. He was still sore. "Reynolds wanted New York, for one thing. Not sure why. But I figure, why not? I've wanted to get back there since the terrorist attacks. After all the firefighters and police officers lost, it's sort of a trek, I guess. Something all of us want to do at one time or another."

Eric finished his pop and headed around the counter toward the sink. He ran the platter under water and sprayed it with a squirt of soap. "I don't miss it."

"Don't miss what?" Clay turned around and faced him. "Working there...or living there?"

Eric didn't look up. "Actually, I didn't live there. I lived in New Jersey."

Clay waited, but as usual, Eric didn't go into details.

"To answer your question, I don't miss working in Manhattan every month or so. I can't believe that was my life before September 11."

"And the other? Staten Island?"

Eric's eyes met his. "I think about it once in a while." "You never talk

about it.”

“Nope.” Eric turned off the water and grabbed a dish towel. “My time with her gave me a life I never would’ve had otherwise. But we promised each other we’d never talk about it. Not to anyone.”

“Not even Laura?”

“Once in a while she’ll say something about the firefighter, about how she’s glad he kept a journal, glad he wrote notes in his Bible.” “That’s what changed you, right? Believing you were this great family guy, a man with an unshakable faith?”

“That—” he ran the towel over the platter—“and her.”

“The woman?”

Eric nodded. “She was very special. It killed me to leave her.”

This was more than Eric had ever shared about that time in his life. Clay wasn’t sure what to make of his brother’s statement. “Did you...were you in love with her?”

“I thought she was my wife; I was *supposed* to love her. And the girl...I remembered her name when I woke up. It wasn’t until the end that we figured out that part.”

“The helmet?” It was one detail Clay did know.

“Yep. I tripped, as close as I can guess.” He set the dry platter on the counter. “The fireman bent over to help me up and his helmet fell off. I picked it up, I remember that. Inside was a picture of the little girl and her name.” He knit his brow together. “When I woke up, her name was the only thing I remembered.”

“She got to you too, didn’t she?” Clay cocked his head. “The little girl?”

“They both did.” Eric gave a slight shake of his head. “But not like you think. When I left them it was no regrets. I was a different man.” He took the platter and headed toward the patio door.

“You said it killed you.”

Eric opened the slider and looked at Clay over his shoulder. “It did.”

He exhaled through pursed lips. “When I realized I wasn’t her husband, things changed between us. I was a married man, so loving her went from being the thing I was trying to remember to something I could never do.” He leaned against the door frame. “Yes, it killed me to leave her. Not because I was in love with her or her daughter, but because I knew how alone they would be.”

“Hmmm.” They stepped outside. Smoke curled up from the sides of the barbecue. A hundred feet away Josh was bent over the garden next to Laura. Clay didn’t look for too long. “What was her name?”

“Doesn’t matter. I don’t like talking about her.”

“Sorry. I guess I always wondered.”

“It’s okay. I was kind of mysterious about her when I came home. I figured no one needed to know.”

Clay let that sit for a minute. “You ever call her, to see how she’s doing?”

“Nope, can’t do that either. God had a very clear reason why I wound up in her house. But when I left, both of us knew we wouldn’t see each other again. It was how we wanted it.” He lifted the barbecue lid. “I have a new life, one I wouldn’t trade for the world. I could never love anyone but Laura, so you see, there’s no room for looking back.” He poked at the steaks. “The good-bye we said that last day at the airport was final.”

Clay stared at the steaks, sizzling and deep brown at the edges. Two minutes passed, maybe three. “But you think about her, right? Once in a while?”

“Once in a while.” Eric sprinkled salt on the meat. “She was incredible, Clay. More strength than any woman I’ve ever known. She loved me unconditionally. We helped each other find a friendship with God. Pretty heady stuff.”

“Was she pretty?”

“Very.” Eric smiled, his eyes distant. “I’m never sure which was the bigger miracle. That I came home completely in love with my wife,

anxious to spend time with Josh, a changed man, really.” He looked at Clay. “Or that I was able to walk away from Staten Island.”

Laura and Josh were approaching them, carrying a big bowl of zucchini and strawberries. Laura smiled first at Eric, then at Clay. “Josh says he gets the strawberries.” She stopped and hugged Clay. Her eyes were serious, concerned. Probably because of the gunfight. “How are you?”

“Fine.” He cleared his throat. The conversation about Staten Island was over, and he could sense from his brother’s body language that Eric was glad. Clay doubted they’d ever talk about it again.

Josh moved in beside Eric and, under Eric’s guidance, the boy began turning the steaks. Laura was persistent. “I was so worried about you, Clay.”

Of course she was. She still cared about him, the same as always. The fact that they’d crossed a line or two back in the months after the terrorist attacks probably never figured into her thinking.

She took a nearby chair, her brow knit together. “We watched it on TV and they showed your car.” Laura put her fingers over her mouth. “Clay, it was awful. I can’t believe you didn’t get hit.”

“I was praying big time.” Clay took the chair opposite Laura. The smell of the steaks filled the air. Dinner would be nice, and then he’d be on his way. Until then, this was good; keeping his thoughts on the current day, the matters at hand. “I was on the floorboard and I could hear him coming closer. He’d already fired at me, so I knew he wanted to take me down.”

Josh’s eyes got wide. “That’s crazy.”

“It was.” Clay worked his fingers into the muscles at the back of his neck. “I was asking God for a way out, and all of a sudden I knew. If I didn’t look over the dash and at least try to stop the guy, I’d be dead in a few seconds.”

Laura shuddered. “I haven’t stopped thanking God ever since I heard.”

“Dad says you’re a good shot.” Josh grinned at him. “All the kids at



school thought it was way cool that you are my uncle.”

Clay felt himself relax. How could he need a break from this? His family loved him, cared about him. “Thanks, Josh.”

“Well—” Eric turned and looked at them—“Josh is doing wonders with the steak. We’ll be ready in about five minutes.”

Laura popped up and headed for the patio door. “I’ll have everything ready inside.” She looked at Clay. “Come help me.”

He could hardly say no. He followed her into the kitchen as a memory came screaming back at him. After the Twin Towers collapsed, Laura had been frozen with shock. For five days she did little more than stare at the television and wait for Eric’s call. From the first day on, the kitchen—this same kitchen—had been his territory. He made all meals, fed Josh, and helped the boy with his homework.

“You’re quiet today.” Laura led the way and handed him the bowl of zucchini. “Wash and slice. The pan’s on the stove.” She took up her position beside him and began rinsing the strawberries. “You sure everything’s okay?”

Her chatter interrupted his thoughts, pulling him back to the here and now. Where he wanted to stay, no matter how much his heart refused to cooperate with him. The whole thing was ridiculous. He grabbed a zucchini from the bowl. “I’m fine. Just thinking about New York, I guess. I’m anxious to go.”

“Eric was saying something about that.” She set into a routine, rinsing a berry, pulling the stem from the top, and tossing it into a china bowl next to the sink. “I think it’ll be good for you, Clay.” Her eyes met his. “You need something different.”

Clay held her gaze. Was she talking about having time away from them, time to find a life of his own? He wanted to ask, but he was afraid of where the conversation would go. “Yeah.” He looked back at the vegetables. “The change’ll do me good.” He finished washing and sliced them into a pan already seasoned with oil. “They’re making me a detective

when I get back. That's the good news."

"Really?" Laura grinned at him over her shoulder. "Congratulations!"

"The time in New York will get me ready." He put the lid on the zucchini. "Funny how things work out."

Laura put the bowl of berries on the table and cleared away Josh's homework. "Could you hand me four plates?"

"Sure."

"They're in the—" Her eyes caught his. "I guess you know where they are." This time something in her expression told him he'd been right earlier. He must've been.

Again the motions were familiar. Reaching for the right cupboard, finding the plates as easily as if they were his own. He decided to take a chance. "It feels funny, working in here again. Brings back a lot of memories."

He felt Laura come a few steps closer, felt her wait until he was looking at her. "I couldn't have gotten through it without you." She tilted her head. "But sometimes I worry about you, Clay."

"Why?" He forced a laugh. He took the stack of plates and passed them to her. He tried not to notice the way their fingers brushed against each other in the transition. "The police work, you mean. The danger?"

"No." Her eyes were softer than before. "I've been praying for you, do you know that?"

"Since the shooting?"

"No." Her voice was clear and quiet and her eyes reached all the way to his soul. "Since Eric came home." She set the plates in a stack on the table. "I want you to find someone, Clay. If..."

He took a step closer. "Go ahead. Say it, Laura."

She let out a small sigh and looked at the floor. When she looked up he knew for certain that she understood how he felt—that he had no intention of coming between her and Eric, but somehow that wasn't enough to stop him from caring about her. Sometimes too much.

She took his hand and gave it a gentle squeeze, then released it. “If Eric hadn’t come home, I’d be your wife by now. I believe that, Clay. You’re a wonderful man, and I was falling hard for you when Eric came home. We both know that.”

“Does Eric?”

“Yes.” She stared at the ceiling and drew in a slow breath. “My marriage to Eric was a formality, it was all but over when he left for New York that September day. He knew that.” She looked at him again. “You know what he told me?”

Clay wasn’t sure he wanted to know. “What?”

“He told me if he hadn’t survived, he would’ve wanted you and me together.”

Clay had no idea how to react. He searched Laura’s eyes for a minute and then walked past her. He grabbed a handful of forks and knives and carried them to the table. Then he turned to her again. “So that’s why you think I need a change of scenery?” He wasn’t mad. He simply wanted to know her feelings.

“I have Eric. Things are different for me.” She took a stack of napkins from the counter and placed them one per setting. When she was finished she found his eyes again. “But if I didn’t, if I were in your place, I’d still be in love with you, Clay. That’s how strongly I felt for you.” She gave him an understanding smile. “Sometimes I catch you looking and I wonder...if maybe you still feel that way about me.”

“I don’t. I—” Clay stopped himself. Her eyes told him instantly that she didn’t believe him. “Laura, I wouldn’t do anything to come between you and Eric.”

“I know that.”

“I hate that I think about you at all.”

“Thanks.”

He sat on the arm of the closest chair. “You know what I mean. I want to forget those three months ever happened.”

“Really?” Laura gave him a small grin.

“Come on, Laura, quit kidding.” He chuckled. “It isn’t good for me to remember it. I’m happy for you and Eric, but sometimes...yeah, sometimes I wonder. And when I do, I beat myself up trying to forget you were ever more than my brother’s girl.”

She lowered her chin. “That’s why I’m praying for you. New York’s a vibrant place, from what I hear. Why don’t you go there and do something crazy? Meet a perfect stranger and ask her for a walk in Central Park. I don’t know.” Laura ran her hand over her straight blonde hair. “God has a plan for you, Clay. Maybe New York is part of it.”

The patio slider opened, and Josh led the way with the platter of steaks. “Dad says I’m ready for Beverly Hills.”

“The boy has the touch.” Eric breathed on his knuckles and rubbed them on his shoulder. “Chip off the old block.”

Clay caught Laura’s eyes one more time before they sat down, and that was it. Another conversation that wasn’t bound to come up again.

That night, as Clay drove home, he thought about the evening. How was it he’d had such strange talks with both Eric and Laura? Must’ve been the fact that he’d almost been killed. Or that he was leaving for New York in a few days.

Something had triggered it.

Whatever it had been, it felt good that Laura knew his feelings. Better still, that she understood. Laura was right about New York City. He should talk to strangers, make friends with the guys in the program, find someone to take in a Broadway play. Why not? He’d only be there three weeks. After that he could come home and start life as a detective. When he did, he promised himself something.

He would get more connected at church, if not his church, another one in the Valley. He would look into the church’s singles group or join a Bible study. After all, the people there had everything in common with him. Only by walking through the doors of a church would he ever find someone to

fall in love with.

Because maybe Laura was right about that too. She'd been praying for him to find someone, and he'd been praying the same thing. And if this was the time in his life when he might meet someone and fall in love, he knew one thing for certain.

It wouldn't be in New York City.

## Ses

Clay is in sy Ford-bakkie op pad na Eric-hulle toe. Hy en Laura het hom genooi om by hulle te kom eet voor hy weggaan. Hy hou by 'n verkeerslig stil en skuif sy donkerbril hoër teen sy neus. Noudat hy besluit het om New York toe te gaan, kan hy nie wag om uit Los Angeles te kom nie.

Eric terg hom dat hy gaan verkleum. Selfs in die winter is dit selde onder twintig grade in Suid-Kalifornië terwyl Manhattan teen Desember waarskynlik toegesneeu sal wees. Clay gee nie om nie. Oor drie dae gaan hy en Reynolds op 'n vliegtuig klim en vir drie weke wegbreek New York toe. Drie weke. Dit voel soos 'n leeftyd, en dis 'n goeie ding.

'n Nuwe omgewing, nuwe mense, nuwe uitdagings. Net wat hy nodig het om sy gedagtes van die spul kwellings weg te neem wat aan hom knaag. Die lig word groen en hy trek haastig weg. Hy is vyf minute laat en hy wil nie Eric-hulle ophou nie.

Nie dat hy regtig baie lus is om te gaan nie.

Die hele storie met Laura is eintlik belaglik. Sy was nooit meer as 'n vriendin nie, en die feit dat sy gelukkig getroud is met sy broer is eintlik net rede tot dankbaarheid. Dis in elk geval hoe hy wíl voel. As hy maar net die regte vrou kan ontmoet, iemand wat sy hunkering na liefde en kameraadskap kan vervul. Iemand wat saam met hom kan lag en bid, iemand wat saam met hom die Here kan dien, iemand saam met wie hy kan tennis speel en laatnag ESPN kyk.

Bejammer mense hom wanneer hulle hom alleen sien uitgaan? As hy op sy eie gaan uiteet, alleen gaan inkopies doen, alleen gaan fliek? Hy haat die kyke. Dis dikwels vroue – selfs mooi vroue – wat 'n oomblik talmend na hom kyk. Die vrae is op hulle gesigte geskryf. Hoekom is 'n man soos hy alleen, en stel hy dalk belang in geselskap?

Nog 'n rooi lig. Clay trap skerp rem en byt op sy tande. Hy stel nie belang nie. Geensins nie. Hy het dit al probeer en dit het telkens net tot 'n ongemaklike afspraak gelei. Ouens van die stasie het hom al male sonder tal aan iemand voorgestel, soms aan 'n suster of vriendin van hulle eie vrou of meisie.

“Jy's nie onaansienlik nie, Michaels,” het Reynolds op 'n keer vir hom gesê.

“Maar ’n mens sou sweer jy het drie oë en ’n stel horings aan die manier waarop jy nie ’n meisie kan hou nie.”

Clay het gelag. “Dankie, my vriend. Net wat ek nodig het om te hoor.”

Die probleem lê nie by hom of die meisies nie. Hulle is oor die algemeen jonk en mooi en aangename geselskap. Los Angeles het geen tekort aan mooi vroue nie. Die tekort is aan gelowige vroue. Vroue wat soos hy glo, wat Christenskap nie net as ’n godsdiens beskou nie, maar as ’n verhouding met die Skepper.

Dit het al gebeur dat hy op ’n toe-oë-afspraak is, of by ’n braai waar een van die ouens hom aan iemand wou voorstel. Wanneer hy noem dat sy werk ’n seën is of dat God ’n plan met mense het, kan hy sien hoe die meisie se gesig val.

“Gaan jy kerk toe?”

’n Uitdrukkinglose kyk. “Kerk? Soos in godsdiens?” Die meisie sou beleef glimlag. “Ek is nie baie godsdienstig nie.”

Natuurlik nie. Na drie lange jare van soortgelyke gesprekke wonder Clay of daar enige ongetroude vroue in Los Angeles is wat dieselfde oortuigings as hy het. Vanselfsprekend is hulle iewers. Maar hy werk soveel nagte en naweke dat hy sukkel om by ’n kerkgroep in te skakel. Wanneer moontlik, gaan hy na die West Valley Christian Church toe, net ’n entjie van sy huis af. Maar hy het nie tyd om by ’n Bybelstudie- of selgroep in te skakel nie, en tot dusver het hy nog nie enkellopende vroue van sy ouderdom ontmoet nie.

Die verkeerslig word groen. Hy verwissel van baan en draai by die eerste straat regs. Eric en Laura woon in ’n lieflike sekuriteitsoord teen die heuwel. Hy het dit altyd geniet om soontoe te gaan, om saam met Eric en Laura te kuier en saam met Josh tyd deur te bring. Maar die laaste tyd kan hy nie wag om huis toe te gaan nie.

Dis waarom die besoek aan New York so goed vir hom gaan wees.

Hy hou in die oprit stil, loop na die voordeur toe en klop een maal voordat hy homself inlaat. Josh sien hom eerste van waar hy by die kombuistafel met ’n handboek besig is. “Oom Clay, raai wat?” Die seun het sy pa se lengte, donkerblonde hare en dieselfde blou oë. Hy het Laura se fyn beenstruktuur, maar verder trek hy na Eric.

“Hei, jy.” Clay sit sy sleutels op ’n tafel by die deur neer en gaan kombuis toe. “Wat?”

Josh skuif sy stoel terug en grinnik. “Ek het die A-span gehaal!”

“Wat? Nou al?” Clay hou sy hand op sodat Josh sy handpalm kan klap. “Jy gaan vir UCLA speel voordat jy jou oë uitvee!”

“Dink Oom so?” Sy oë word groot van opwinding. “Ek sal wát wil gee.”

“Wag net tot hulle jou in die span het. Dan gaan hulle nie terugkyk nie.”

Clay kom ’n paar treë nader en kyk na die handboek. Op die bladsy is daar ’n swetterjoel geometriese vorms. “Wiskunde?”

Josh se gesig val. “Dis ’n pyn.”

“Kan ek help?”

“Nee.” Josh knik na die agterdeur. “Pa het my gehelp toe ek van die skool af gekom het. Ek weet nou hoe die goed werk.” Hy gee Clay ’n skewe glimlag. “Ek haat dit net, dis al.”

Daar is dit weer. ’n Bevestiging dat hierdie gesin heeltemal regkom sonder hom. Josh het hom nie meer nodig vir huiswerk of voetbal speel of basketbal oefen nie. Eric doen dit nou.

En Laura ... vanselfsprekend het sy hom nie nodig nie. Hy is haar vriend, maar hulle bring nooit meer enige tyd alleen deur nie; hulle het ook nie rede nie. So baie het verander. Ná drie jaar is ook dit nie meer nuut nie.

Eric werk van die huis af. Hy doen dieselfde soort werk as voorheen, verdien dieselfde inkomste, behoort aan dieselfde buiteklub én spandeer tien maal soveel tyd saam met Laura en Josh. Dis net die Here wat só ’n ideale opset kon bewerkstellig.

Die skuifdeur gaan oop en Eric kom met ’n leë vleisbak ingestap. “Die vleis is op die kole.” Hy glimlag eers vir Clay, dan vir Josh. “Hoe gaan dit met die boeke?”

“Oukei.” Josh trek ’n gesig. “Ek wens net ek was al klaar.”

“Sê jou wat, los eers die somme.” Eric sit die bak op die granieteiland in die middel van die kombuis neer. “Jy kan my met die vleis help.”

“Pa bedoel hulle omdraai en als?”

“Jip.” Eric gee ’n laggie. “Ma is buite besig om murgpampoentjies te kry. Gaan help ’n bietjie daar totdat ek weer by die vuur is.”

Josh laat nie op hom wag nie. Hy spring op en vlieg op lang bene by die deur uit. Clay leun verwonderd teen die toonbank. Josh is ’n gelukkige, tevrede kind noudat dinge by die huis verander het. Net nog ’n bewys van dit wat hy reeds weet – die ongeëwenaarde invloed van ’n goeie pa in ’n seun se lewe.

Hulle eie pa het lank voor sy en Eric se tienerjare nie meer ’n rol gespeel nie. Die man het eers van hulle ma geskei toe hulle op hoërskool was, maar teen daardie tyd het hulle hom skaars geken. Nie een van hulle het sedertdien meer enige kontak met hom nie.

*Clay beweeg sy kakebeen. Dis hoekom ek ’n kind wil hê, Here, sodat ek die soort pa kan wees wat goed is vir sy kind. Soos Eric vir Josh. Hy byt op sy tande. Hoekom neem dit so lank?*

Eric maak ’n Sprite oop en sit die blikkie op die toonbank voor Clay neer. “Is jy oukei?”

“Hè?” Clay staan regop. “Ja. Natuurlik.”

“Dit lyk asof jy diep dink.”

“Nee, ek’s oukei.” Hy is nie, maar Eric hoef dit nie te weet nie. Sy ouer broer is nie verantwoordelik vir die krapperigheid wat hy die afgelope tyd ervaar nie. “Kan ek help met die kos?”

“Nee, dis onder beheer.” Eric kry vir hom ook ’n koeldrank en kom staan langs Clay. “En ... ” Hy sit die blikkie neer en vou sy arms. “Hoe was dit?”

Hoe was dit? Dan tref dit hom. Natuurlik ... Eric praat oor die skietery. Dis die rede vir al die vrae. Clay haal sy skouers op. “Nogal soos teikenskiet, sou ek

sê.”

“Regtig?” Eric vernou sy oë. “Teikenskiet?”

“Natuurlik nie.” Clay gee ’n skerp laggie en skud sy kop. “Die ou het met ’n AK-47 op my afgestorm, en ek het hom van die vloer van my patrolliemotor af geskiet. En in plaas daarvan om ’n kartonteiken vol gate te skiet, het ek ’n mens doodgemaak.”

Eric se stem is sagter. “Dit was selfverdediging, Clay. Jy weet dit tog.”

“Ek weet.” Hy drink die helfte van sy koeldrank en sit die blikke neer. “Aan die begin was ek siek daaroor, maar die feit is, ek het nie ’n keuse gehad nie. Dit was ek of hy.”

“Hoe het jy op hom geskiet sonder om getref te word?”

Clay haal sy skouers op. “Nes jy dit reggekry het om ná die aanvalle weer by die huis te kom.” Clay geniet hierdie gemoedelike geskerts tussen hom en Eric. Ondanks die versoeking om op hom jaloers te wees, kan hy nie anders as om hulle tyd saam te geniet nie.

Eric knik, maar hy beantwoord nie die vraag nie; hy hoef nie. Hulle albei weet waarom hulle vandag hier staan en gesels. Dis slegs aan die Here te danke.

“Josh sê hy is vir die A-span gekies.”

“Ja.” Eric gee ’n laggie. “Hy dril my só dat selfs my doele beter is as op kollege.” Hy skiet ’n denkbeeldige bal in die rigting van die stoepdeur. “Die kind het nie einde nie.”

“Ek sal na ’n paar van sy wedstryde moet gaan kyk as ek terugkom.”

Eric se glimlag vervaag. “Wat het jou laat besluit om vir drie weke New York toe te gaan?”

“Dit was Reynolds se idee, een van die speurders by die stasie. Ek het drie weke betaalde verlof terwyl hulle die skietery ondersoek. Ek kan dit sommer ook as opleiding beskou.”

“Opleiding?” Eric kyk betekenisvol na hom. “Jy bedoel jy het uiteindelik jou bevordering gekry?”

“Ja.” Clay sit sy hande op die toonbank agter hom. “Snaakse tydsberekening, nè? Jy skiet ’n verdagte dood, gaan terug stasie toe en hoor dat hulle jou speurder maak.”

“Hei!” Eric klop hom op die rug. “Die wonderlik, kleinboet! Dit moes al ’n paar jaar terug gebeur het.” Hy aarsel. “Maar hoekom New York? Kan jy nie hier opleiding ontvang nie?”

“Seker.” Clay stoot hom weg van die toonbank en strek sy rug. Hy het ’n paar spiere in sy rug getrek toe hy tydens die voorval op die vloer geduik het. Hy is nog seer. “In die eerste plek was Reynolds lus vir New York. Ek’s nie seker hoekom nie. Maar toe dink ek, waarom nie? Ek wou nog altyd weer New York toe gaan. Ná alles wat die brandweer en polisie verloor het, is dit ’n soort pelgrimstog. Iets wat ons almal die een of ander tyd wil doen.”

Eric drink sy koeldrank klaar en loop na die wasbak toe. Hy hou die vleisbak onder die kraan en druk ’n bietjie skottelgoedseep daarop uit. “Ek mis dit glad nie.”



“Mis wat nie?” Clay draai om en kyk na hom. “Om daar te werk ... of daar te bly?”

Eric kyk nie op nie. “Eintlik het ek nie daar gebly nie. Ek het op Staten Island gebly.”

Clay wag, maar soos gewoonlik brei Eric nie uit nie.

“Om jou vraag te beantwoord, ek mis dit nie om aanhoudend Manhattan toe te vlieg vir werk nie. Ek kan nie glo dis hoe my lewe voor 11 September was nie.”

“En Staten Island?”

Eric se oë ontmoet syne. “Ek dink af en toe daaraan.”

“Jy praat nooit daaroor nie.”

“Nee.” Eric draai die kraan toe en begin die bak afdroog. “My tyd by haar het my ’n lewe gegee wat ek andersins nooit sou hê nie. Maar ons het mekaar belowe dat ons nooit daaroor sou praat nie. Met niemand nie.”

“Nie eens Laura nie?”

“Sy sal af en toe iets oor die brandweerman sê, oor hoe bly sy is dat hy dagboek gehou het en in sy Bybel geskryf het.”

“Dis wat jou verander het, nè? Die feit dat jy geglo het dat jy ’n wonderlike, gelowige gesinsman was?”

“Ja ... ” Hy droog die bak klaar af. “En sy.”

“Die vrou?”

Eric knik. “Sy was baie spesiaal. Dit het my gebreek om haar net so te los.”

Dis die meeste wat Eric al ooit oor daardie hoofstuk van sy lewe gesê het. Clay is nie seker hoe om sy broer se stelling te verstaan nie. “Het jy ... was jy verlief op haar?”

“Ek het gedink sy’s my vrou; ek was *veronderstel* om vir haar lief te wees. En die dogtertjie ... ek het haar naam onthou toe ek bygekom het. Ek het eers aan die einde geweet hoe alles inmekaarsteek.”

“Die brandweerhelm?” Dis een detail waarvan Clay weet.

“Ja. Sover ek kan aflei, moes ek gestruikel het.” Hy sit die skoon vleisbak op die toonbank neer. “Die brandweerman het gebuk om my te help en sy helm het afgeval. Ek kan onthou dat ek dit vir hom opgetel het. Aan die binnekant was daar ’n foto van ’n dogtertjie en haar naam.” Hy frons. “Toe ek bygekom het, was haar naam al wat ek kon onthou.”

“Sy het ook diep in jou hart gekruip?” Clay hou sy kop skeef. “Die klein dogtertjie?”

“Hulle albei het.” Eric skud sy kop effens. “Maar nie soos jy dink nie. Toe ek daar weg is, was dit sonder enige spyt. Ek was ’n ander mens.” Hy neem die bak en begin na die stoep toe loop.

“Jy sê dit het jou gebreek.”

Erik maak die skuifdeur oop en kyk oor sy skouer na Clay. “Dit het.” Hy blaas sy asem uit. “Toe ek besef dat ek nie haar man was nie, het dinge tussen ons verander. Ek was ’n getroude man. Dis eintlik ironies; ek het so hard probeer onthou dat ek vir haar lief was, en nou is dit iets wat ek nooit sal

vergeet nie.” Hy leun teen die deurkosyn. “Ja, dit het my gebreek om daar weg te gaan. Nie omdat ek op haar verlief was nie, maar omdat ek geweet het hoe alleen sy en haar dogtertjie sou wees.”

“Hmmm.” Hulle gaan buitentoe. ’n Rokie krul uit die braaier. Onder in die tuin is Josh en Laura by ’n bedding doenig. Clay kyk nie lank na hulle nie. “Wat was haar naam?”

“Dit maak nie saak nie. Ek wil nie graag oor haar praat nie.”

“Jammer. Ek het seker maar nog altyd gewonder.”

“Dis oukei. Ek was nogal geheimsinnig oor haar toe ek teruggekom het. Ek het gevoel niemand hoef te weet nie.”

Clay kou ’n oomblik daaraan. “Bel jy haar ooit? Om te hoor hoe dit gaan of iets?”

“Nee, ek kan dit ook nie doen nie. God het ’n baie duidelike rede gehad waarom ek in haar huis moes wees. Maar toe ek teruggekom het, het ons albei geweet dat ons mekaar nie weer sou sien nie. Dis hoe ons dit wou hê.” Hy tel die braaier se deksel op. “Ek het ’n nuwe lewe, en ek sal dit vir niks verruil nie. Ek sal nooit vir iemand so lief wees soos vir Laura nie, en daar is eenvoudig nie rede vir omkyk nie.” Hy toets die vleis met ’n braaivurk. “Die afskeid daardie dag op die lughawe was finaal.”

Clay kyk na die vleis, nou diepbruin aan die buitekant. Twee, dalk drie minute gaan verby. “Maar jy dink aan haar? Af en toe?”

“Af en toe.” Eric strooi sout oor die vleis. “Sy was ongelooflik, Clay. Sterker as enige vrou wat ek al ontmoet het. Sy was onvoorwaardelik lief vir my. Ons het mekaar gehelp om die Here te leer ken. Groot goed.”

“Was sy mooi?”

“Baie.” Eric glimlag, ’n peinsende kyk in sy oë. “Ek is nooit heeltemal seker wat die grootste wonderwerk was nie. Die feit dat ek met my tuiskoms heeltemal verlief op my vrou was en soveel moontlik tyd saam met Josh wou deurbring, dat ek ’n ander mens was.” Hy kyk na Clay. “Of dat ek daarin kon slaag om van Staten Island af weg te gaan.”

Laura en Josh is op pad met ’n groot bak murgpampoentjies en aarbeie. Laura glimlag eers vir Eric, dan vir Clay. “Josh sê hy kry die aarbeie.” Sy staan nader om Clay ’n drukkies te gee. Haar oë is ernstig, besorg. Waarskynlik as gevolg van die skietvoorval. “Hoe gaan dit met jou?”

“Goed.” Hy maak keel skoon. Die gesprek oor Staten Island is afgehandel, en hy kan aan sy broer se liggaamstaal aflei dat Eric dankbaar is. Clay dink nie hulle sal ooit weer daaroor praat nie.

Josh gaan staan langs Eric en sy broer verduidelik hoe die seuntjie die steaks moet omdraai. Laura is nog nie klaar nie. “Ek was so bekommerd oor jou, Clay.”

Natuurlik was sy. Sy gee nog vir hom om, soos altyd. Die feit dat hulle verhouding in die maande ná die terroriste-aanvalle amper in iets meer ontwikkel het, kom waarskynlik nooit by haar op nie.

Sy gaan sit op ’n stoel naby hom. “Ons het dit op TV gesien en hulle het jou

kar gewys.” Laura plaas haar vingers oor haar mond. “Clay, dit was verskriklik. Ek kan nie glo jy het niks oorgekom nie.”

“Ek het die hele tyd gebid.” Clay gaan sit op die stoel oorkant Laura. Die braaivleisgeur hang in die lug. Hulle gaan lekker eet, en dan gaan hy huis toe. In die tussentyd is dit goed om sy gedagtes by die hede, die onmiddellike te hou. “Ek was onder in die kar en ek kon hom hoor naderkom. Hy was reeds besig om op my te skiet, en ek het geweet dat hy my wou doodmaak.”

Josh se oë rek. “Dis crazy.”

“Dit was.” Clay vryf die spiere agter in sy nek. “Ek het die Here vir ’n uitweg gevra, en skielik het ek net geweet. As ek nie oor die paneelbord gekyk het en ten minste probeer het om die ou te keer nie, sou ek ’n paar sekondes later dood wees.”

Laura ril. “Ek kan nie vir die Here genoeg dankie sê vandat ek gehoor het nie.”

“Pa sê jy’s ’n goeie skut.” Josh grinnik vir hom. “Al die kinders by die skool dink dis cool dat jy my oom is.”

Clay voel hoe hy begin ontspan. Hoe kan hy hiervan wil wegkom? Sy familie is lief vir hom en gee vir hom om. “Dankie, Josh.”

“Wel,” Eric draai om en kyk na hulle, “Josh is besig om homself te oortref met hierdie steaks. Ons sal oor vyf minute kan eet.”

Laura staan op. “Ek gaan alles binnekant gereed kry.” Sy kyk na Clay. “Sal jy my gou kom help?”

Hy kan nie eintlik nee sê nie. ’n Herinnering kom ongenooi by hom op toe hy haar kombuis toe volg. Ná die Twin Towers se ineenstorting het Laura in ’n soort skoktoestand verkeer. Vir vyf dae het sy amper niks anders gedoen as om voor die TV te sit en vir Eric se oproep te wag nie. Van die eerste dag was die kombuis – hierdie selfde kombuis – sy domein. Hy het al die etes gemaak, gesorg dat Josh eet en die seuntjie met sy huiswerk gehelp.

“Jy is stil vanaand.” Laura loop vooruit en gee vir hom die bak murgpampoentjies. “Sal jy hulle vir my was en opkerf? Die pan is op die stoof.” Sy kom staan langs hom en begin die aarbeie afspoel. “Is jy seker alles is oukei?”

Haar gesels onderbreek sy gedagtes en dwing hom terug na die hede. Waar hy wil wees, maak nie saak hoe sy hart daarteen skop nie. Dis belaglik. Hy haal ’n pampoentjie uit die bak. “Alles is reg. My kop is seker maar net by New York. Ek raak nou haastig om te gaan.”

“Eric het iets daarvan gesê.” Nadat sy elke vruggie afgespoel het, trek sy die stingeltjies uit en laat val die aarbeie in ’n porseleinbak langs die wasbak. “Ek dink dit sal jou goeddoen, Clay.” Hulle oë ontmoet. “Jy het ’n verandering nodig.”

Clay hou haar oë gevange. Bedoel sy hy het nodig om hulle vir ’n rukkie nie te sien nie, tyd om sy eie ding te doen? Hy wil vra, maar hy is bang vir die rigting waarin die gesprek dalk gaan. “Ja.” Hy kyk weer na die groente. “Die verandering sal my goeddoen.” Nadat hy die murgpampoentjies gewas het,

sny hy hulle oor 'n reeds geoliede, warm pan. “Hulle gaan my speurder maak wanneer ek terugkom. Dis die goeie nuus.”

“Rêrig?” Laura glimlag oor haar skouer vir hom. “Geluk!”

“Die tyd in New York gaan eintlik 'n soort voorbereiding wees.” Hy plaas die deksel oor die groente. “Snaaks hoe dinge uitwerk.”

Laura sit die bak aarbeie op die tafel neer en ruim Josh se huiswerk op. “Kan jy vir my vier borde aangee?”

“Sekerlik.”

“Hulle is in die ... ” Haar oë vang syne. “Natuurlik weet jy waar hulle is.” Hierdie keer is daar iets in haar uitdrukking wat hom laat besef dat hy vroeër reg was.

Die handelinge voel opnuut bekend. Om die regte kas oop te maak en die borde sonder dink uit te haal. Hy besluit om 'n kans te waag. “Dit voel snaaks, om weer in die kombuis te werk. Dit bring baie herinneringe terug.”

Hy voel hoe Laura 'n paar treë nader kom, voel hoe sy wag totdat hy na haar kyk. “Ek sou nooit sonder jou daardeur gekom het nie.” Sy hou haar kop skeef. “Maar soms is ek bekommerd oor jou, Clay.”

“Hoekom?” Sy lag is geforseerd. Hy haal die borde uit en gee dit vir haar aan. Hy probeer nie oplet dat hulle vingers in die proses aan mekaar raak nie. “Jy bedoel die polisiewerk. Die gevaar?”

“Nee.” Daar is nou 'n sagte uitdrukking in haar oë. “Ek bid vir jou. Weet jy dit?”

“Sedert die skietery?”

“Nee.” Haar stem is stil en helder en dit voel asof sy tot in sy hart kan kyk. “Sedert Eric huis toe gekom het.” Sy sit die stapel borde op die tafel neer. “Ek wil hê jy moet iemand ontmoet, Clay. As ... ”

Hy gee 'n tree nader. “Wat is dit? Sê dit net, Laura.”

Sy sug en kyk na die vloer. Toe sy opkyk, weet hy dat sy verstaan hoe hy voel – dat hy geen intensie het om tussen haar en Eric te kom nie, maar dat dit nie genoeg is om hom daarvan te weerhou om vir haar om te gee nie, soms te veel.

Sy neem sy hand en gee dit 'n sagte drukkie. Dan laat sy dit gaan. “As Eric nie huis toe gekom het nie, sou ek teen hierdie tyd jou vrou gewees het. Ek glo dit, Clay. Jy is 'n wonderlike man en ek was besig om vir jou te val toe Eric huis toe gekom het. Ons albei weet dit.”

“Weet Eric?”

“Ja.” Sy kyk na die plafon en trek haar asem stadig in. “My huwelik met Eric was 'n formaliteit. Dit was so te sê op die rotse toe hy daardie Septemberdag New York toe is. Hy het dit geweet.” Sy kyk weer na hom. “Weet jy wat het hy vir my gesê?”

Clay is nie seker of hy wil weet nie. “Wat?”

“Dat as hy nie oorleef het nie, hy sou wou hê dat ek en jy bymekaar moes wees.”

Clay het geen idee hoe hy moet reageer nie. Hy kyk vir 'n paar oomblikke

ondersoekend in haar oë en draai dan na een van die kaste. Hy haal 'n hand vol messe en vurke uit 'n laai en neem dit na die tafel toe. Dan draai hy weer na haar. “Is dit hoekom jy dink ek het 'n verandering van omgewing nodig?” Hy is nie kwaad nie. Hy wil bloot weet wat sy voel.

“Ek het vir Eric. My lewe het verander.” Sy haal servette uit en plaas een langs elke plekmatjie. Toe sy klaar is, kyk sy weer na hom. “Maar as ek dit nie gehad het nie, as ek in jou posisie was, sou ek nog steeds verlief op jou gewees het, Clay. Dis hoe sterk my gevoelens was.” Haar glimlag is teer en begrypend. “Soms sien ek dat jy na my kyk en dan wonder ek ... of jy steeds op daardie manier oor my voel.”

“Ek voel nie meer so nie, Laura. Ek ... ” Clay bedink hom. Haar oë verklap dadelik dat sy hom nie glo nie. “Laura, ek sal niks doen om tussen jou en Eric te probeer kom nie.”

“Ek weet dit.”

“Ek haat die feit dat ek enigsins aan jou dink.”

“Baie dankie.” Sy lyk gemaak gekrenk.

Hy gaan sit op die armleuning van die naaste stoel. “Jy weet wat ek bedoel. Ek wil vergeet dat daardie drie maande enigsins gebeur het.”

“Regtig?” Laura gee 'n klein glimlaggie.

“Kom nou, Laura, hou op grappies maak.” Hy gee 'n laggie. “Dis nie goed vir my om dit te onthou nie. Ek's bly vir jou en Eric, maar soms ... ag, partykeer wonder ek. En wanneer dit gebeur, het ek al my dae om te probeer vergeet dat jy ooit iets meer as my broer se meisie was.”

Sy laat sak haar ken. “Dis hoekom ek vir jou bid. New York is 'n wonderlike, opwindende stad. Gaan soontoe en wees 'n bietjie waaghalsig. Gaan gesels met 'n vreemdeling en nooi haar om saam met jou in Central Park te gaan stap. Ek weet nie.” Laura vee oor haar steil, blonde hare. “God het 'n plan vir jou, Clay. Dalk is New York deel daarvan.”

Die skuifdeur gaan oop en Josh kom met die bak vleis te voorskyn. “Pa sê ek's gereed vir Beverly Hills.”

“Die outjie het 'n slag.” Eric blaas op sy kneukels en vryf sy skouer daarmee. “Lyk my die appel het nie ver van die boom geval nie.”

Clay vang Laura se oog 'n laaste keer voordat hulle aansit, en dan nie weer nie. Nog 'n gesprek wat stellig nie weer opgehaal sal word nie.

Toe Clay daardie aand huis toe ry, is sy gedagtes by die afgelope aand. Hoe is dit dat hy sulke vreemde gesprekke met beide Eric en Laura gehad het? Dit moes die feit wees dat hy amper dood was. Of dat hy oor 'n paar dae New York toe gaan.

Iets het daartoe aanleiding gegee.

Wat dit ook al was, hy is bly dat Laura weet hoe hy voel. Beter nog, dat sy verstaan. Laura is reg wat New York betref. Hy moet met vreemdelinge gesels, vriende maak met die ouens in die opleidingsprogram, iemand na 'n Broadway-uitvoering neem. Hoekom nie? Hy gaan net vir drie weke daar wees. Daarna kan hy huis toe kom en sy lewe as speurder begin. Hy belowe

homself iets.

Wanneer hy terugkom, gaan hy meer betrokke raak by die kerk. Indien nie syne nie, een van die ander in die omgewing. Hy sal by die kerk se enkellopendes inskakel of by 'n Bybelstudiegroep aansluit. Die mense daar het trouens alles met hom in gemeen. Dis slegs deur by 'n kerk in te skakel dat hy iemand gaan ontmoet met wie hy sy lewe kan deel.

Want dalk het Laura ook daar 'n punt beet. Sy bid dat hy iemand ontmoet, en dit is ook sy gebed. Maar van een ding is hy baie seker.

Dit mag wees dat hy op hierdie tydstip in sy lewe iemand gaan ontmoet en liefkry, maar dit sal beslis nie in New York gebeur nie.

# Chapter SEVEN

Jamie still had her hair in a towel when the doorbell rang.

She darted down the hall and leaned into Sierra's room. "I've got it, honey. Keep getting ready." Then she took the stairs as fast as she could. "Coming."

It was Aaron, of course. He was meeting them at her house, taking them to lunch, and then to Chelsea Piers. Sierra had been wanting to visit the indoor pool there, and that Saturday morning was the perfect opportunity.

There was just one problem.

Jamie opened the door and glanced back up toward Sierra's room. She hadn't told her daughter that Aaron was coming. She meant to, but time had gotten away from her and now it was too late.

"Oh." She smiled at Aaron. "Sorry, come on in."

"Hi." He was dressed in a denim button-down shirt and jeans a shade lighter. His look took her by surprise. She was used to seeing him in his FDNY uniform—that was what he wore to work at St. Paul's, and what he had on just about every time they'd ever gone out for a meal. "I'm early."

"That's okay." She nodded toward the living room. "Do you mind waiting?"

"Not at all." He smiled at her, but it wasn't the easy smile they'd shared for the past few years. Jamie's skin crawled, and she chided herself. He'd been to her house before. Why couldn't she see this as just another visit, another chance to spend an afternoon with a friend who'd come to mean a great deal to her?

She gave Aaron a quick smile and hurried back up the stairs. She knew the answer. Nothing would ever be light between them again. Not until she either agreed that it was time to think of being more than friends, or until she put the idea to rest.

Even if she did that, she was pretty sure things wouldn't be the same.

She would always know his intentions, and that was bound to make things awkward. The towel fell off her head as she rounded the corner into her bedroom. *Their* bedroom. Hers and Jake's. She hated when she slipped and thought of it as only hers. It had been theirs; it would always be theirs.

She tossed the towel in a laundry basket and set about drying her hair. If only he hadn't come early. She needed to finish getting ready and find Sierra. Before Sierra found him.

Five minutes later, she was dressed and on her way to find Sierra when her daughter stepped out of her room and stared down through the entryway toward Aaron. She made a face and looked at Jamie. "What's he doing here?"

"Sierra!" Jamie held a finger to her lips and closed the distance between them. "He's coming with us."

"To Chelsea Piers?" Her voice was loud and whiny; Aaron was bound to hear her. "I thought it was just me and you, Mommy."

"Look." Jamie took her daughter by the hand and led her back into her bedroom. "I'm sorry; I should've told you he was coming. But don't be rude, Sierra. That isn't like you."

She knit her blonde eyebrows together. "But why's he have to come? I wanted it to be just us. You and me."

"Mr. Hisel wants to be our friend; sometimes Mommy needs a friend, okay?" Jamie straightened herself and made an attempt to fix her hair. "Try to understand, okay, honey?"

Sierra's shoulders drooped a notch. "Okay."

They headed down the stairs together. Jamie had to remind herself to smile so Aaron wouldn't think anything was wrong. The plan was for a round of miniature golf followed by an hour in the pool. Jamie had hinted that she might swim too. But with Aaron along, she had no intention of getting into a bathing suit.

Aaron smiled at her, a smile that told her he was in no hurry. Not that morning for their outing, and not when it came to his interest in her. Jamie



felt herself relax. There was no need to feel strange and awkward. This was Aaron Hisel, the man she'd counted on and shared her deepest sorrows with. Certainly they could share a day at Chelsea Piers together without her feeling all tied up in knots.

He crossed the old wooden floor and came up to Sierra. "Looks like we've got us a fun day ahead, huh?"

"Yes, sir." Sierra shot Jamie a look, but at least she remembered to keep both her expression and her tone pleasant.

They headed for Jamie's van, and when Aaron climbed into the front seat, Sierra hesitated and looked at Jamie. No words were needed; Jamie could read her daughter's thoughts perfectly.

Small talk filled the ride, and Sierra remained silent. It wasn't until they were finished golfing and Sierra was in the pool that Aaron finally turned to Jamie and frowned. "She doesn't like me, does she?"

Jamie tried to look surprised. "Who? Sierra?" She forced a chuckle. "She's a seven-year-old, Aaron. She imagined our trip one way, and when it wasn't how she pictured it, she got an attitude. It has nothing to do with you."

Aaron put his hand on her knee. "Come on, Jamie, it's okay. I'm not Jake and I never will be. I won't ever try to take his place. I can understand if Sierra feels funny having me around."

Having him around? Jamie felt her head start to spin. He was talking like they'd already made a commitment to each other. She was probably supposed to be reassured by the fact that he didn't want to replace Jake, but what exactly did that mean? That if by some turn of events they wound up together, he wouldn't try to be a father to Sierra? That he'd treat her with kindness and civility but never the passionate love of a daddy?

It was too much for Jamie. She glanced at her knee and felt her breath catch in her throat. It was one thing for them to be together when they worked at St. Paul's or when they ate together at Battery Park. But here? With Sierra swimming nearby?

She stood up and collected her purse. “Want something to drink?”

Aaron lowered his brow. “Weren’t we talking?”

“Yes, but...” She massaged her throat. “The chlorine in here. I’m dying of thirst.”

“Okay.” He made a sound that was almost a chuckle. “Get me a Coke, if you don’t mind.”

Jamie felt anger bubble its way through her veins as she walked away. She *did* mind, in fact. She minded that she wasn’t in the pool with her daughter, and that Aaron wanted a relationship with her. And most of all she minded that Jake had died in the first place. He should be here now, splashing and swimming with Sierra, picking the little girl up and tossing her into the water until she couldn’t breathe from laughing so hard.

She minded all of it.

After she paid for the drinks, she stepped into an alcove, where she could see Sierra through a long window. *God...what am I doing here with Aaron? I’m not ready for this, I’m not.*

*Daughter, be still.*

The holy whispers skimmed across the rough waters of her soul, calming the wind and whitecaps, giving her a moment of peace. *Thank You, God...even now You’re here.* She leaned against the glass. *I’m so confused.*

*I’m here. Be still and wait for Me.*

Be still and wait? Jamie took a step back. Where had she heard that before? It was a Scripture, wasn’t it? Something Jake had written about in his journal. The journal she’d read a hundred times. *Be still and wait on the Lord.* Yes, that was it. Be still and wait. Being still was something Jamie was never good at. Oh, she’d gotten better. Losing Jake had done that for her.

But times like this, she was glad for God’s reminders.

Ever since the fateful lunch with Aaron, she’d been going a hundred miles an hour, running from the future the same way she used to run from

God. Be still and wait? It was exactly what she needed to hear, what she needed to do.

She folded her arms against her waist and stared at her shoes. Her heart was still racing, still screaming at her to run or tell Aaron the truth—that she simply couldn’t make herself feel something that wasn’t there yet.

*Calm, Jamie...be calm. God knows what you need.* Bit by bit she felt the waves grow still, felt order restored to her soul. Her heartbeat slowed and she breathed in long and steady. Everything was going to be okay. Somehow the pieces of her future would come together, and the process would be easier if she didn’t fight it. If she was still and waited on God.

She’d been gone almost ten minutes, and Aaron was bound to wonder about her. Holding tight to the direction God had given her, she rounded the corner and found a smile. Aaron was watching for her as she walked up.

“Long line?”

Lying would be the easy way out. She shook her head. “Not really.” One of the drinks in her hands was his, and she handed it to him. Then she took the spot beside him on the bleachers and looked for Sierra.

“She’s over there.” Aaron pointed to the shallow end where a group of girls Sierra’s age were playing a game.

“Thanks.” She glanced at Sierra and saw her stand on the side of the pool, her legs long and skinny. One of the girls in the pool motioned for her to jump, but she looked for Jamie first. Their eyes met, and Jamie waved, just as Sierra did a cannonball into the water and came up laughing.

Jamie set her drink down. “Aaron...”

“Uh-oh.” His smile didn’t hide the regret in his voice. “Here it comes. The part where you tell me you’ve thought it over and you only want to be friends, right?”

She was about to explain herself but he kept on.

“Look, Jamie.” As a fire captain for the FDNY, Aaron had to be one of the toughest leaders in the department. And, from everything Jake had

ever said about him, he was. But now his eyes were kinder than she'd ever seen them. "I never meant to pressure you. It's just..." He lifted his hands and let them fall again. "I guess I never would've known if I hadn't said something."

The awkwardness from earlier that morning seemed ridiculous now. Her sudden fear of him was a slip back to the old Jamie—who was so often motivated by a paralyzing fear. The new Jamie, who believed in God's plan for her life, hadn't had to deal with fear in nearly three years.

Until Aaron told her he had feelings for her.

"You're not saying anything." Aaron cocked his head. "I can take a lot, Jamie. But I can't take losing your friendship." He reached for her hand, squeezed it once, and let go. "Okay, say something."

"I will." Her heart swelled with feelings—care or concern or friendship. Or something more, Jamie wasn't sure. "You're right, I have thought it over. But I'm not sure I want only a friendship, Aaron. I don't know *what* I want. I feel crazy saying it's too soon." She allowed a sad laugh. "Three years is a long time, I know that. But in here—" her hand rested on the place above her heart—"I'm not ready to love someone else. At least, I don't think I am."

Aaron sucked in his cheek and narrowed his eyes. He watched Sierra for a minute, splashing near one of the pool's smaller slides. "So...you haven't completely written off the idea?"

"No." This time Jamie gave him a sideways hug. The sensation wasn't strange or awkward. In fact, it felt nice. Safe and warm, if not quite electric. She kept her fingers cupped around his shoulder and waited until he looked at her before letting go. "I care a lot about you, Aaron. I love having you there, talking with you—" she gestured toward the pool—"being together on days like this. It feels right, it feels like it could be more serious one day."

Aaron slid closer to her so that their arms were touching. "That's more than enough for me." He looked at Sierra again, and the hint of a

smile played in his voice.

Now that the awkward feeling was gone, Jamie realized something. She wasn't only enjoying his company, she was enjoying the feel of his body against her arm.

A handful of emotions raced around in Jamie's heart. How terrible she was to enjoy the physical contact of a man who had been Jake's boss, his mentor; how awful that she could ever find another man's company, his presence, enjoyable. And the most dominant emotion—how good she felt, now that they'd talked things out, with him at her side.

She ignored the pangs of guilt and leaned into him for a few seconds. "Thanks for understanding."

"I know you, Jamie." He glanced at her and pressed a gentle kiss to her forehead. Then, just as quickly, he straightened and shot another look at Sierra. "I knew you'd need time. I just wanted you to know how I felt."

She remembered Sue's warning, that Aaron could never be right for her as long as he didn't share her faith. Never mind his age or the fact that he'd been Jake's boss. If he didn't believe in Christ the way she did, what depth could they ever share together?

This would be the time to say something about it, to ask if he would ever be interested in learning more about God, maybe going to church with her. But somehow the subject didn't seem to fit. Besides, Jake had never pushed her toward God. He'd lived out his faith every day of his life. Maybe it was her turn to do that where Aaron was concerned.

She remembered the holy whispers in her heart a few minutes earlier. God wanted her to be still and wait. Didn't that mean waiting before making faith an issue with Aaron? Besides, she didn't want to upset him, didn't want him to slide back down the bench from her.

"I like this. Sitting with you like this."

"Me too." He gave her an understanding smile. "As long as we don't think about getting serious just yet, right?"

"Right."

In the distance, Sierra climbed out of the pool and grabbed her towel. It was clear by her actions she was about to run toward them—probably needing something to eat or drink. Panic shot through Jamie. It was one thing to sit this way when Sierra wasn't looking, when she was too far away to make out exactly how close Jamie was sitting next to Aaron. But to have her daughter run up and see them...that was more than Jamie was ready for.

She nodded in Sierra's direction. "I think I'll get her a drink. Want anything else?"

"I'm fine." The look in Aaron's eyes told her he understood, and better still, he was at peace with her actions.

Before she turned and went to meet Sierra, she smiled once more at him. "Thanks, Aaron. I...I feel so much better about things."

"Me too."

The awkwardness and angst and even the guilt lifted as Jamie walked away. Her steps were lighter than they'd been in a long time. And throughout lunch, only one thought about Aaron remained.

How kind and understanding he'd been through this new phase in their friendship, and how maybe—one day not too far off—his kindness might open doors to a place she would never before have considered.

## **Sewe**

Jamie se hare is nog in 'n handdoek toe die voordeurklokkie lui.

Sy draf in die gang af en leun by Sierra se kamer in. "Ek sal gaan oopmaak, my skat. Maak jy verder klaar." Dan vlieg sy by die trappies af. "Ek kom!"

Dit sal Aaron wees. Hy kom hulle opklaai vir ete en van daar af gaan hulle Chelsea Piers toe. Sierra wil al geruime tyd in die binnenshuise swembad gaan swem en hierdie Saterdagoggend is die ideale dag.

Daar is net een probleem.

Jamie maak die deur oop en kyk oor haar skouer na Sierra se kamer. Sy het nie vir haar dogtertjie gesê dat Aaron kom nie. Sy wou, maar die tyd het haar ingehaai en nou is dit te laat.

"O." Sy glimlag vir Aaron. "Jammer, kom in."

“Haai.” Hy dra ’n denim-toeknoophemp en ligblou jeans. Sy voorkoms vang haar onkant. Sy sien hom gewoonlik in sy brandweeruniform – dis wat hy aanhet wanneer hy by St. Paul’s werk, en wat hy amper altyd dra wanneer hulle iets gaan eet. “Ek’s vroeg.”

“Dis oukei.” Sy knik na die woonkamer. “Sal jy ’n rukkie wag?”

“Natuurlik.” Hy glimlag vir haar, maar dis nie die gemaklike glimlag van die afgelope paar jaar nie. Jamie voel kriewelrig en berispe haarself. Dis nie die eerste keer dat hy by haar huis is nie. Sy moet dit eenvoudig as net nog ’n kuier sien, nog ’n geleentheid om ’n middag saam met ’n vriend deur te bring wat baie kosbaar vir haar geword het.

Sy gee Aaron ’n vinnige glimlag voordat sy haastig boontoe gaan. As dit maar so eenvoudig was. Daar gaan nooit weer ’n ligte atmosfeer tussen hulle wees nie. Nie voordat sy saamstem dat dit tyd is om meer as vriende te wees of daarteen besluit nie.

Maar selfs al besluit sy op laasgenoemde, is sy taamlik seker dat dit nooit weer dieselfde tussen hulle sal wees nie. Sy sal altyd van sy intensies bewus wees, en dit sal definitief ’n ongemaklikheid skep. Die handdoek val van haar kop af toe sy haar kamer bereik. *Hulle* kamer. Hare en Jake s’n. Sy haat dit wanneer sy die fout maak om aan die kamer as hare te dink. Dit was hulle s’n; dit sál altyd hulle s’n wees.

Sy gooi die handdoek in die wasgoedmandjie. As hy net nie vroeg gekom het nie. Sy wil klaar aantrek en met Sierra gaan praat. Voordat Sierra op hom afkom.

Vyf minute later is sy aangetrek en na Sierra toe op pad toe haar dogtertjie uit haar kamer kom en Aaron onder sien wag. Sy trek ’n gesig en kyk na Jamie. “Wat maak hy hier?”

“Sierra!” Jamie hou haar vinger voor haar lippe en loop vinnig tot by haar. “Hy kom saam met ons.”

“Chelsea Piers toe?” Haar stem is hard en temerig; Aaron moet haar kan hoor. “Ek het gedink dis net ek en Mamma.”

“Kyk.” Jamie neem haar dogtertjie aan die hand en lei haar terug na haar slaapkamer toe. “Ek’s jammer; ek moes vir jou gesê het dat hy kom. Maar moenie ongeskik wees nie, Sierra. Ek ken jou nie so nie.”

Sy frons. “Maar hoekom moet hy kom? Ek wou hê dit moet net ons twee wees. Ek en Mamma.”

“Oom Aaron wil ons vriend wees; partykeer het Mamma ’n vriend nodig, oukei?” Jamie kom orent en probeer haar hare netjies kry. “Probeer verstaan, sal jy, my skat?”

Sierra se skouers hang. “Oukei.”

Hulle gaan saam ondertoe. Jamie moet haarself forseer om te glimlag sodat Aaron nie dink daar’s fout nie. Hulle het afgespreek om eers te gaan miniatuurgholf speel en daarna vir ’n uur swembad toe te gaan. Jamie het dit oorweeg om ook te swem. Maar met Aaron in die nabyheid is daar nie ’n manier dat sy in ’n swembroek verskyn nie.

Aaron glimlag vir haar, 'n glimlag wat verklap dat hy nie haastig is nie. Nie wat vanoggend se uitstappie of 'n moontlike verhouding betref nie. Jamie begin ontspaan. Dis glad nie nodig om vreemd en ongemaklik te voel nie. Die man voor haar is Aaron Hisel, iemand waarop sy staatmaak en met wie sy haar grootste hartseer deel. Sy is seker hulle kan 'n dag by Chelsea Piers deurbring sonder om selfbewus en ongemaklik te voel.

Hy loop oor die ou houtvloer tot by Sierra. "Klink my daar wag 'n lekker dag vir ons, nè?"

"Ja, Oom." Sierra gee Jamie 'n kyk, maar ten minste onthou sy om haar gesig en stem vriendelik te hou.

Hulle loop na Jamie se motor en toe Aaron voor inklim, steek Sierra vas en kyk na Jamie. Sy het nie nodig om enigiets te sê nie. Jamie weet presies wat haar dogtertjie dink.

Op pad gesels hulle oor gemeenplase, maar Sierra bly in haarself gekeer. Dis eers nadat hulle miniatuurgholf gespeel het en Sierra in die swembad is dat Aaron uiteindelik na Jamie draai en frons. "Sy hou nie van my nie, nè?"

Jamie probeer verbaas lyk. "Wie? Sierra?" Sy forseer 'n laggie. "Sy is sewe jaar oud, Aaron. Sy het haar die uitstappie op een manier voorgestel, en toe dit nie so verloop nie, word sy dikmond. Dit het niks met jou te doen nie."

Aaron plaas sy hand op haar knie. "Kom nou, Jamie, dis oukei. Ek is nie Jake nie, en sal nooit wees nie. Ek sal nooit probeer om sy plek in te neem nie. Ek kan verstaan dat Sierra 'n tydjie sal neem om aan my gewoond te raak."

Gewoond te raak? Jamie se kop begin draai. Hy praat asof hulle alreeds op 'n verhouding besluit het. Sy is waarskynlik veronderstel om gerusgestel te voel deur die feit dat hy nie Jake se plek wil inneem nie, maar wat presies bedoel hy? Dat indien hulle ooit bymekaar sou uitkom, hy nie gaan probeer om 'n pa vir Sierra te wees nie? Dat hy vriendelik en beskaaf teenoor haar gaan optree, maar nooit met die onbevange liefde van 'n pa nie? Dis te veel vir Jamie. Sy kyk na haar knie en voel hoe haar asem in haar keel vassteek. Dis een ding om saam met hom by St. Paul's te werk of iets te gaan eet. Maar hier? Met Sierra 'n paar treë van hulle af in die swembad?

Sy staan op en tel haar beursie op. "Wil jy iets drink?"

Aaron frons. "Is ons nie nog besig om te praat nie?"

"Ja, maar ..." Sy vryf oor haar keel. "Dis seker die chloor. Ek is dood van die dors."

"Oukei." Hy gee 'n halwe laggie. "Kry vir my 'n Coke, as jy nie omgee nie."

'n Skielike woede stu in haar op toe sy wegloup. Die feit is, sy géé om. Sy gee om dat sy nie saam met haar dogtertjie in die swembad is nie, en dat Aaron 'n verhouding met haar wil hê. Bo alles gee sy om dat Jake in die eerste plek moes doodgaan. Hy moes nou hier gewees het om saam met Sierra in die water te plas en te swem, om hulle dogtertjie op te tel en in die water te gooi totdat sy uitasem van die lag is.

Sy gee beslis om.

Nadat sy vir die koeldranke betaal het, gaan staan sy van waar sy Sierra deur



'n lang venster kan sien. *Here .... wat soek ek hier saam met Aaron? Ek is nie gereed hiervoor nie, ek's nie gereed nie.*

*My dogter, wees stil.*

Die sagte woorde sweef oor die onstuimige waters in haar binneste, en stil die wind en die branders sodat sy 'n oomblik se vrede ervaar. *Dankie, Here ... selfs nou is U hier.* Sy leun teen die glas. *Ek's so verward.*

*Ek's hier. Wees stil en wag op My.*

Wees stil en wag? Jamie gee 'n tree terug. Waar het sy dit al voorheen gehoor? As sy reg onthou, staan dit iewers in die Bybel. Iets wat Jake in sy dagboek geskryf het. Die dagboek wat sy al honderde kere gelees het. *Wees stil en wag op die Here.* Ja. Wees stil en wag. Jamie was nog nooit baie goed met stil wees nie. Ag, sy het beter geword. Om Jake te verloor het haar geleer om stil te wees en te wag.

Maar op sulke tye is sy dankbaar vir God se stem.

Sedert Aaron se bekentenis funksioneer sy in hoogste versnelling. Dis asof sy vir die toekoms vlug soos sy destyds vir die Here gevlug het. Wees stil en wag? Dis presies wat sy vandag moes hoor, wat sy moet doen.

Sy vou haar arms en kyk na haar voete. Haar hart klop steeds onrustig en sy het steeds die drang om weg te hardloop of vir Aaron die waarheid te gaan vertel – dat sy haarself eenvoudig nie sover kan bring om iets te voel wat nog nie daar is nie.

*Kalmeer, Jamie ... raak rustig. God weet wat jy nodig het.* Geleidelik voel sy hoe die golwe bedaar en hoe daar weer rustigheid in haar gemoed kom. Haar hartklop keer terug na normaal en sy haal diep asem. Alles gaan uitwerk. Op die een of ander manier gaan die stukkies van haar toekoms in plek val, en dit sal makliker gaan as sy haar nie teen die proses verset nie. As sy stil word en op die Here wag.

Sy is al amper tien minute lank weg en Aaron sal begin wonder. Sy bêre God se woorde diep in haar hart toe sy uitgaan en haar glimlag terugkry. Aaron hou haar dop toe sy naderkom.

“Was daar 'n lang tou?”

'n Leuen sal die maklike uitweg wees. Sy skud haar kop. “Nie regtig nie.” Sy gee sy Coke vir hom aan. Dan gaan sit sy langs hom op die bankie en kyk of sy vir Sierra sien.

“Sy is daar anderkant.” Aaron wys na die vlak kant van die swembad waar 'n groep dogtertjies van Sierra se ouderdom 'n speletjie speel.

“Dankie.” Haar oë gaan na waar Sierra op die rand van die swembad staan. Sy het lank geword. Een van die dogtertjies in die swembad wys sy moet spring, maar sy kyk eers in Jamie se rigting. Hulle oë ontmoet en Jamie waai net toe Sierra 'n bom in die water maak en uitgelate opkom.

Jamie sit haar koeldrank neer. “Aaron ...”

“Hô-ô.” Sy glimlag verdoesels nie die teleurstelling in sy stem nie. “Hier kom dit. Jy gaan seker nou vir my sê dat jy gedink het en dat jy net wil vriende wees, nê?”

Sy wil net begin verduidelik, maar hy vervolg.

“Kyk, Jamie.” As brandweerhoof moet Aaron een van die gehardste leiers in die mag wees. En uit alles wat Jake van hom gesê het, is hy dit ook. Maar nou is daar ’n sagter lig in sy oë as wat sy al ooit gesien het. “Ek wou nie druk op jou plaas nie. Dis net ...” Hy tel sy hande op en laat val hulle weer. “Ek het net gedink ek sou nooit weet as ek nie vra nie.”

Die ongemak van vroeër voel nou belaglik. Haar skielike vrees was ’n terugval na die ou Jamie – wat so dikwels vanuit ’n verlamme vrees opgetree het. Die nuwe Jamie, wat in God se plan vir haar lewe glo, het vir amper drie jaar sonder vrees gelewe. Totdat Aaron haar van sy gevoelens vertel het.

“Jy sê niks nie.” Aaron hou sy kop skeef. “Ek kan baie hanteer, Jamie. Maar ek sien nie kans om jou vriendskap te verloor nie.” Hy steek sy hand uit om hare ’n drukkie te gee, en laat dit gaan. “Sê tog net iets.”

“Ek sal.” Haar hart swel – van omgee of besorgdheid of vriendskap. Of iets meer, Jamie is nie seker nie. “Jy’s reg, ek het daaroor nagedink. Maar ek’s nie seker of ek net ’n vriendskap wil hê nie, Aaron. Ek weet nie wát ek wil hê nie. Dit voel simpel om te sê dat dit te gou is.” Sy gee ’n hartseer laggie. “Drie jaar is lank, ek weet dit. Maar hier binne ...” haar hand rus op haar hart “... is ek nie seker of ek gereed is om vir iemand anders lief te wees nie. Altans, ek dink nie ek is nie.”

Aaron trek sy asem in en vernou sy oë. Hy kyk vir ’n paar oomblikke na Sierra wat naby een van die swembad se kleiner glybane rondplas. “Met ander woorde ... jy het die idee nie heeltemal afgeskryf nie?”

“Nee.” Hierdie keer gee Jamie hom ’n skewe drukkie. Dit voel nie vreemd of ongemaklik nie. Trouens, dit voel lekker. Dalk nie opwindend nie, maar veilig en warm. Sy hou haar hand op sy skouer en wag totdat hy na haar kyk voordat sy hom laat gaan. “Ek gee baie om vir jou, Aaron. Dis vir my heerlik om jou hier te hê, met jou te gesels.” Sy wys na die swembad. “Om op sulke dae te kuier. Dit voel reg, dit voel of dit eendag iets meer kan wees.”

Aaron skuif nader aan haar sodat hulle arms aan mekaar raak. “Dis meer as genoeg vir my.” Hy kyk weer na Sierra en daar is ’n glimlag in sy stem. Noudat die ongemak iets van die verlede is, raak Jamie van iets bewus. Dis nie net sy geselskap wat sy geniet nie. Sy geniet ook die gevoel van sy liggaam teen haar arm.

’n Hand vol emosies wedywer in Jamie se hart. Hoe aaklig van haar om die fisiese kontak van ’n man te geniet wat Jake se baas en mentor was; hoe aaklig van haar om ’n ander man se geselskap en teenwoordigheid aangenaam te vind. En die mees oorheersende gedagte – hoe goed dit nou, nadat hulle sake uitgepraat het, voel om hom langs haar te hê.

Sy ignoreer die skuldgevoelens en leun vir ’n paar sekondes teen hom aan. “Dankie dat jy verstaan.”

“Ek ken jou, Jamie.” Hy kyk na haar en soen haar saggies op haar voorkop. Hy lig sy kop egter vinnig en kyk in Sierra se rigting. “Ek weet jy het tyd

nodig. Ek wou net hê jy moet weet hoe ek voel.”

Sy dink aan Sue se waarskuwing, dat Aaron nooit die regte man vir haar sal wees as hy nie haar geloof deel nie. Laat staan maar sy ouderdom of die feit dat hy Jake se bevelvoerder was. Wat kan hulle mekaar uiteindelik bied as hy nie ook in Christus glo nie? Sy behoort nou met hom daaroor te praat, hom te vra of hy ooit daarin sal belangstel om meer van die Here te leer, of dalk saam met haar sal kerk toe gaan. Maar om die een of ander rede voel dit nie nou na die geleë tyd nie. Jake het in elk geval nooit druk op haar geplaas nie. Hy het sy geloof elke dag uitgeleef. Dalk is dit wat sy nou ten opsigte van Aaron moet doen.

Sy dink aan die fluistering wat sy ’n paar minute vroeër gehoor het. God wil hê sy moet stil wees en wag. Beteken dit nie dalk dat sy moet wag voordat sy met Aaron oor geloofsake gesels nie? Sy wil hom in elk geval nie ontstel nie, wil nie hê hy moet nou verder van haar af sit nie.

“Dis vir my lekker. Om so by jou te sit.”

“Vir my ook.” Hy glimlag begrypend. “Solank ons net nie nou al daaraan dink om ernstig te raak nie, nè?”

“Ja.”

Sierra klim uit die swembad en gryp haar handdoek. Dis duidelik dat sy na hulle toe gaan hardloop – waarskynlik lus vir iets om te eet of te drink. Jamie voel paniekerig. Dis een ding om so te sit terwyl Sierra nie kyk nie, wanneer sy te ver is om uit te maak presies hoe naby Jamie aan Aaron sit. Maar as haar dogtertjie nou hier aangehardloop moet kom en hulle sien ... dis meer as waarvoor Jamie gereed is.

Sy knik in Sierra se rigting. “Ek wil gou vir haar ’n koeldrank gaan koop. Wil jy nog iets hê?”

“Ek’s reg.” Aaron se oë verklap dat hy verstaan en, beter nog, dat hy nie ’n probleem met haar optrede het nie.

Voordat sy omdraai om na Sierra toe te gaan, glimlag sy weer vir hom.

“Dankie, Aaron. Ek voel baie beter oor alles.”

“Ek ook.”

Die ongemak en angste en selfs die skuldgevoel lig toe Jamie wegloop. Haar voetstappe is ligter as in ’n lang tyd. En terwyl hulle middagete eet, is daar net een gedagte wat oorbly.

Hoe goed en begrypend Aaron in hierdie nuwe fase van hulle vriendskap is en hoe sy goedheid dalk ’n deur sal oopmaak wat sy nooit tevore sou oorweeg het nie.

# Chapter EIGHT

The angry butterflies were back. Sierra was dressed for bed and heading to the bathroom to brush her teeth, but all she could think about was the talk. This was the night she was going to talk to Mommy about the thing Katy said, the thing about their daddies and the helmets.

“Sierra, are you in your nightgown?” Mommy was in her room folding some towels.

“Yes.” Sierra did a gulp.

“Did you brush your teeth?”

“That’s what I’m doing right now.”

“Okay, sweetie, I’ll be there in a minute to pray with you.” Mommy’s voice was happy, the way it sounded ever since the swimming at Chelsea Piers.

Why was she so happy? Was it because of a fun day out with Sierra? Or was it Captain Hisel? Captain Hisel was nice, but Sierra wasn’t sure. He wasn’t like her daddy at all, and that’s another reason why the angry butterflies were in her tummy.

A boy named James in her class at school lost his firefighter daddy. And last summer his mommy got married again, so now James had a new daddy. No, not a new daddy, but a second daddy.

Sierra walked into the bathroom and made a face at the mirror. She didn’t want a new daddy. But sometimes she looked at James and thought how lucky he was because now he had a second daddy. And that wouldn’t be so bad, but not Captain Hisel. He was old and he didn’t talk to her or play with her the way a second daddy should.

“Ready, honey?” More happy voice.

Sierra jumped. “Almost.” She took the cap off the toothpaste and set it careful on the counter. Sometimes if she wasn’t careful the cap rolled onto the floor and once when that happened she couldn’t find it again. Then she squeezed out a pea-sized spot on her pink Barbie toothbrush, because

before she used to put a whole caterpillar size on but then it would grow inside her mouth and come out the sides. When that happened it usually got on her nightgown, so Mommy said use a pea size.

Thinking about her teeth made her tummy feel a little better. Her toothbrush was the best kind. It had a little motor on it. She put the bristly end in her mouth and pushed the white button. The toothbrush wiggled and jiggled and cleaned every tooth sparkly clean. Sierra spit out the old toothpaste and rinsed out her brush.

She was just looking for one of her dinosaur flossers when Mommy walked in and leaned by the door. “Hi.”

“Hi.” Sierra didn’t look up. She found a new flosser, opened it up, and pushed it between her teeth. That way she didn’t have to start having the talk with Mommy just yet.

When she was finished, she put everything away, and dried the wet spots off her face. “Okay. I’m ready.”

“Well.” Her mommy lifted her eyebrows high and looked at the sink area. “That’s the neatest teeth-brushing job I’ve ever seen.”

“Thank you.” Sierra stood perfectly still, feet together, and waited. “Can we go to my room now?”

“Sure.” A strange look was in her mommy’s eyes. “Everything okay, honey?”

“Yes.” Her tummy did a drop. This was the moment she’d been waiting for. She followed her mommy across the hall and into her own pink bedroom. Then she flopped up on her ruffy bed and let her feet hang over the edge. “Can I ask you something?”

“Sure.” Her mommy still sounded happy, even though she looked curious. She sat on the bed too, up near the pillows. She pulled her feet up and hugged her legs. “What’s up?”

Sierra turned so she could see her mommy better. “Katy said something weird when we were at her house.”

Right away Mommy got a funny look on her face. “Something

weird?”

“Mmhhh.” She nodded. “She told me how come my daddy didn’t die in the Twin Towers if he was with her daddy.”

Her mommy’s mouth opened, but no words came out. Also her face looked a little whitish. Finally she said, “Well, Sierra, that’s a good question.”

*Good question* was what Mommy said when she didn’t want to give an answer. At least not a quick answer. Sierra made sure her tone was nice. “So what’s the answer?”

“That was a very hard time for everyone, honey. Nothing that happened was easy to understand.” Her mommy leaned her head back for a minute. When she looked at Sierra again, her eyes were wet. “God knows exactly when each person will come home to heaven. I guess that’s my best answer.”

Sierra tapped her fingers on her leg. Her mommy’s words still didn’t feel like an answer, really. “So that’s why he didn’t die when Katy’s daddy died?”

“Sierra, why did Katy start talking about that? What brought it up?”

“The helmets.”

This time Mommy looked sickish around her eyes. Her voice got quiet and shocked. “The helmets?”

Her daddy’s fire helmet sat on her dresser. It was cleaned off because it got dirty in the fire where Daddy died. It sat right next to the picture of her and Daddy from one of the days after he came home from the hospital. He had bandages on his head, and crutches. The picture was special, just like every picture Sierra had of her daddy. But the helmet was the most specialest thing Sierra owned. Katy had one too.

“That.” Sierra pointed to the helmet. “Katy has one on her dresser too.”

“Yes.” Her mommy made a coughing sound. “That’s because Katy’s mommy felt the same way I do. That you girls should have the helmets that

belonged to your daddies.”

“That’s not what I mean.” Sierra shook her head. Her stomach still hurt a little but she was getting frustration inside her. “Katy says they found their helmets at the same time. When they were cleaning up the Twin Towers.”

Her mother looked at her and blinked. Then she leaned close and hugged her for a very long time. When she pulled back, her eyes said very certain that their talk was over. “Sierra, it’s too late for this tonight.” She kissed her and gave her butterfly kisses, the way Daddy used to do it. “Let’s talk about it tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow’s Halloween. And it’s Sunday. I’ll see Katy at Sunday school and then what if she says that thing again? What am I supposed to say?”

Her mommy looked down and said the quiet words, “Help me, God,” which Sierra did not understand. Why did her mother need God’s help to answer one easy question? Next her mommy looked up and said, “Let’s have church at the beach tomorrow, Sierra.”

“At the beach?”

“Yes.” Her mommy’s chin was shaking a little bit. “You and me by ourselves. We’ll go to the same beach where Daddy and I used to take you jet skiing, okay?”

“Won’t it be too cold?”

“Probably.” Mommy did a sort-of smile. “We’ll wear our sweaters and bring chairs to sit in. Then we can read from the Bible and pray and have a little talk.”

“About the helmets?” Sierra wasn’t sure she could wait that long, plus she wanted to tell Katy she was wrong. It wasn’t weird at all. But the part about the helmets still didn’t make sense.

“Yes, about the helmets.”

“And then go to Katy’s dress-up party for dinner?”

“Yes, that too.”

A good feeling came into Sierra's tummy, then. Because even though she had to wait, at least she would know the answer. She wouldn't have any more questions about her daddy or why he didn't die in the Twin Towers or how come Katy said they found his helmet next to her daddy's helmet.

After tomorrow, everything would make sense.

Jamie barely closed the door and made it to her bed before she collapsed to her knees. "God!" The sound was a whisper soaked with anguish and fear and desperation. "I'm not ready for this."

This time there were no holy messages, no still, small voice assuring her that God was there, standing ready.

Always she had known it would come to this, that someday she would have to explain to Sierra how her father had actually been killed in the terrorist attacks. But now it seemed impossible to say the words, impossible to explain that the man she'd brought orange juice to, the man she'd sat with and sang with and read stories with for three months while he got better, hadn't been her father but a stranger.

In the years since then, Jamie had always figured she'd know when the time was right. But that wasn't really what she'd counted on. The truth was, she hoped she wouldn't have to tell Sierra until she was a teenager, eighteen maybe. That way her daughter wouldn't remember anything but a blur of hazy images from the time in her life when Eric Michaels lived with them.

But now? When she still had the picture of the man on her dresser?

She'd probably looked at it a thousand times in the last three years, and now, tomorrow on the beach, she would have to tell Sierra that the man in the picture wasn't her daddy.

*I don't want to tell her, God...* She hung her head. *What's wrong with me? I should've said something a long time ago.*

Her knees hurt. She struggled to her feet and fell onto her bed. Her



own questions echoed in her heart until an answer started to form. She didn't want to tell Sierra because a part of her still wanted to believe it herself. That was the problem, wasn't it? Those were the three most difficult months of her life, and having Eric Michaels, believing he was Jake, was the only reason she'd survived.

God knew she would've crumbled much like the towers if she'd learned that week that Jake was one of the dead. So instead he brought her a substitute. A Jake look-alike.

Once she knew he wasn't Jake, she had helped him to figure out his identity. After that he'd gone home to his wife and son, but a part of her still held on to the comfort of knowing that she'd had Jake three months longer than Sue had Larry, than any of the other FDNY widows had had their husbands.

Telling Sierra the truth would change that time, alter the memories so that none of them brought comfort. How could they if the man in the memory wasn't Jake but a stranger? If she was forced to paint the situation with truth, those memories would be shocking, abrasive. How could she have mixed them up? What was *wrong* with her that she could sit and talk and eat and laugh with a stranger and all the while think him Jake?

No matter that a part of her wanted to tell Sierra the truth. It was easier the way she'd chosen to deal with it.

For three months she'd had Jake back, almost the way she'd always had him. And then, overnight, he turned into someone else, someone with a family in Los Angeles. Before he found his wife and son, she wished he never would, that somehow she could keep him. Even after she helped him find his family, even at the airport with his wife about to get off a plane and take him home, Jamie wanted to grab his hand and run away with him.

But that would've been wrong. First, because the man belonged with his family; second, because he wasn't Jake.

Even now, it felt like Jake had been with them. Eric had done such a good job of studying Jake's Bible, his journal, that as the weeks passed he

actually sounded like Jake and acted like him. He even learned to curl Sierra's hair the same way Jake would've curled it.

He was *like* Jake in every way. But he wasn't Jake.

When Eric Michaels said good-bye, Jamie felt God's peace like never before. She watched him walk away, kept her eyes on him while he went to his wife and hugged her, then Jamie turned around without ever looking back. She had kept her promise and told only Sue and Aaron. The media called often back then, but she shared the story with no one.

Jamie stared at the ceiling. What had she done? Were her efforts to close the door on Eric Michaels so good, she'd forgotten to work through her emotions? She'd broken down when they had his blood tested, the day they realized he wasn't Jake. But her grieving had been over losing Jake, not about believing a stranger was her husband.

She looked at the clock. Nine-forty-five; Sue would still be up. The cordless phone was a few feet away, off the charging unit as usual. Jamie grabbed it and punched in Sue's number.

Her friend answered on the first ring. "Hello?"

"Sue..." Jamie's throat was thick.

"Jamie?"

"Yes, I...Sue, could you pray for me?"

"What's wrong?" Concern flooded Sue's voice. "You sound upset."

Jamie's lungs hurt, and she realized she was holding her breath. She exhaled and pushed her fingers into the roots of her hair. "It's been a long day."

"Weren't you out with Aaron and Sierra?"

"Yes." Jamie closed her eyes. "That's not the problem."

Sue waited. "What then?"

"I guess the girls were talking, and Katy told Sierra that rescue workers found both their daddies' helmets at the same time, in the rubble of the Twin Towers."

"What?" Shock rang in Sue's tone. "Where on earth would she have

heard that?"

"I don't know. Maybe she overheard us talking one day, or maybe someone else told her. Anyway, that's not the point. Katy's right; I don't blame her for telling Sierra the truth."

"Did Sierra ask about it?"

"Yes." Jamie opened her eyes, sat up, and slipped out of bed. She had nowhere to go so she stood there, unmoving. "She wanted to know why Katy's daddy died in the Twin Towers and her daddy didn't. And then she wanted to know about the helmets."

"Great." Sue sighed. "I'm so sorry, Jamie. You don't need this right now."

"It's okay. I need it sometime and apparently God wants it to be now."

"What are you going to do?"

"Tell her the truth." Jamie took slow steps toward the tall dresser, the one that had been Jake's. His Bible and journal sat on top, where she could easily find them when she needed to get lost in his heart, his mind, his faith.

"Oh, Jamie, no wonder you want me to pray."

Tears stung at Jamie's eyes, but she resisted them. She put one hand on Jake's Bible. Beside her, within her, she could feel the Lord watching, standing guard, even though she hadn't heard Him speak to her that night. He was there and He would see her through the next day. "Yes, that's why."

"I'll be praying the whole day. Call me when you're ready to talk about it, okay?"

"Okay." Jamie ran her fingers over the Bible's worn leather cover.

"Thanks. And who knows. Maybe it'll be the best thing for both of us."

They said their good-byes and Jamie clicked the off button. She tossed the phone back onto the bed and took Jake's Bible from the dresser. With her eyes on the cover, on the smudged place where his engraved

name had all but worn off, she backed up until she hit the rocking chair that had always been in their room.

She sat down and opened the old book to a section of Scripture she'd read before. Philippians, the fourth chapter, thirteenth verse. Carefully she turned the pages, savoring the yellow highlighted sections and the precious notations Jake had written in the margins until she reached the right spot.

Her eyes found the Scripture immediately.

*I can do all things through Christ who gives me strength.*

She looked out the window at the old elm tree outside. It was hidden in the shadows, but she could see its leaves rustling in the evening breeze. She'd been sitting outside watching Sierra play the first time she found that verse. Her mind savored the words again. *I can do all things through Christ who gives me strength.*

Once more she looked at the page, wanting to soak in the truth long enough to lean on it come morning. But instead of seeing the Scripture about strength, her eyes landed on verse four. Jake had highlighted the next few lines in blue, and Jamie couldn't remember ever reading them.

She squinted so she could see the words more clearly in the dim light of the room.

*Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*

It wasn't one verse but four. Four wonderful, hope-filled lines of truth that breathed new life into her. The best part was that the Lord was near. Wasn't that exactly how she'd been feeling while she was talking to Sue? That the Lord was truly near?

And what were His words of advice for troubled hearts? Rejoice! Find a reason to be glad, and then don't get anxious. Instead pray, and God, because He's so good, will provide a peace the world knows nothing about.

A thin dark line was drawn from that section of Scripture to a scribbled notation near the top of the page. This was her favorite part of reading Jake's Bible. The words he'd added gave her an insight she hadn't had when he was alive.

She shifted so the light was better.

*God wants everyone to be gentle, even us tough FDNY guys. The reason? He is closer than we think.*

Jake was an amazing man, strong and gutsy and gentle in every way. But times like this she wished she could see him one more time, see him face-to-face and tell him how much it meant to her that he'd left a road map for her and Sierra to follow. Yes, Jake was right; God was closer than they thought.

She closed the book and held it to her heart. *Take...if only you knew how much I miss you.* Tears came and this time she didn't stop them. *I know you so much better now.*

For a while she sat there, pretending Jake was beside her, lying in bed sleeping, ready for an early-morning shift. If only she could crawl into the covers and find him there one more time, his sweet breath warm against her face. Nights like this, if she thought hard enough, she could almost feel him stirring in his sleep, putting his arm around her and making her feel like the safest, most loved woman in the world.

She opened her eyes and looked out the window again.

God had pulled her through every day since September 11; He would get her through the talk with Sierra. She set Jake's Bible back on the dresser, brushed her teeth, and climbed into bed. Lying there, she did a quick inventory of the day: the trip to Chelsea Piers, how she had enjoyed sitting by Aaron.

But as she fell asleep it was something else that made her smile.

After tomorrow, Sierra would know the truth about Jake's death; there would be nothing left to hide. She would simply tell their daughter what really happened and be there for her, whatever she needed.

And best of all, God would be with her. Strength would come not only from the truth in the Scriptures but from the truth Jake himself had written. And that was almost like having him there too.

## Agt

Die kwaai vlinders is terug. Sierra het haar nagklere aan en is op pad badkamer toe om haar tande te gaan borsel, maar al waaraan sy kan dink, is dat sy met Mamma moet praat. Vanaand moet sy praat oor wat Katy gesê het, van hulle pappas en die helms.

“Sierra, het jy al jou nagklere aan?” Mamma is in haar kamer besig om handdoeke op te vou.

“Ja.” Sierra sluk.

“Het jy al tande geborsel?”

“Op pad.”

“Goed so, liefie, ek gaan nou kom dat ons kan bid.” Mamma se stem is gelukkig, eintlik al vandat hulle by Chelsea Piers gaan swem het.

Hoekom is sy so gelukkig? Is dit omdat sy ’n lekker dag saam met Sierra gehad het? Of is dit kaptein Hisel? Kaptein Hisel is gaaf, maar Sierra is nie seker nie. Hy is glad nie soos haar pappa nie, en dis nog ’n rede waarom die kwaai vlinders in haar maag rondvlieg.

James wat in haar klas is, se brandweermanpa is ook dood. En laas somer het sy ma weer getrou, en nou het James ’n nuwe pappa. Nee, nie ’n nuwe pappa nie, maar ’n tweede pappa.

Sierra loop badkamer toe en trek gesig vir die spieël. Sy wil nie ’n nuwe pappa hê nie. Maar partykeer kyk sy na James en dink hoe gelukkig hy is omdat hy nou ’n tweede pappa het. En dit sal nie so sleg wees nie, maar nie kaptein Hisel nie. Hy is oud en hy praat nie met haar of speel met haar soos ’n tweede pappa moet nie.

“Klaar, my skat?” Weer die gelukkige stem.

Sierra wip. “Amper.” Sy haal die tandepasta se doppie af en sit dit versigtig op die wasbak neer. As sy nie versigtig is nie, val die doppie partykeer op die vloer en dan kry sy hom nie weer nie. Sy druk net ’n klein bietjie tandepasta op haar pienk Barbie-tandeborsel uit. Aan die begin het sy lekker baie opgesit, maar dan het dit al hoe meer skuim in haar mond gemaak en by die kante uitgeloop en op haar nagrok gemors. Mamma sê sy moet net ’n klein bietjie uitdruk.

Om aan haar tande te dink, laat haar maag ’n bietjie beter voel. Haar tandeborsel is van die beste soort. Hy het ’n klein enjintjie. Sy sit die borseltjie in haar mond en druk die wit knoppie. Die tandeborsel begin bibber en bewe, en borsel elke tand silwerskoon. Sierra spoeg die tandepasta uit en

spoel haar tandeborsel af.

Sy soek na die vlos toe Mamma inkom en teen die deur leun. “Haai.”

“Haai.” Sierra kyk nie op nie. Sy kry haar dinosourus-vlos, breek ’n stukkiet af en wikkelt die vlos tussen haar tande in. Sy vat lank sodat sy nie nou dadelik met Mamma hoef te praat nie.

Toe sy klaar is, bêre sy alles en vee haar mond mooi af. “Oukei. Ek’s klaar.”

“Nou toe.” Haar mamma lig haar wenkbroue en kyk na die wasbak. “Dis die netjiesste wat ek iemand al ooit sien tande borsel het.”

“Dankie.” Sierra staan doodstil met haar voete langs mekaar en wag. “Kan ons nou na my kamer toe gaan?”

“Natuurlik.” ’n Vreemde kyk verskyn in haar ma se oë. “Is alles oukei, my skat?”

“Ja.” Haar maag maak ’n draai. Dis die oomblik waarvoor sy gewag het. Sy volg haar ma deur die gang na haar eie pienk kamer toe. Dan klim sy op haar valletjiesbed en laat haar voete oor die kant hang. “Kan ek Mamma iets vra?”

“Natuurlik.” Haar mamma klink nog steeds gelukkig, al lyk sy ernstig. Sy kom sit ook op die bed, bo by die kussings. Sy trek haar bene op en sit haar arms om haar knieë. “Uit daarmee.”

Sierra draai skeef sodat sy haar ma mooier kan sien. “Katy het iets snaaks gesê toe ons by haar huis was.”

Mamma kry dadelik ’n ander kyk op haar gesig. “Iets snaaks?”

“Mhmm.” Sy knik. “Sy het gevra hoekom my pappa nie saam met haar pappa doodgegaan het as hy saam met hom in die Twin Towers was nie.”

Haar ma se mond gaan oop, maar daar kom nie woorde uit nie. Haar gesig lyk ook wit. Uiteindelik sê sy: “Wel, Sierra, dis ’n goeie vraag.”

Mamma sê altyd *dis ’n goeie vraag* as sy nie ’n antwoord wil gee nie. Of nie ’n vinnige antwoord nie. Sierra maak seker dat sy in ’n gawe stem praat. “Nou wat’s die antwoord?”

“Dit was vir ons almal ’n baie moeilike tyd, my skat. Daar was so baie goed wat niemand verstaan het nie.” Haar ma laat sak haar kop agteroor. Toe sy weer na Sierra kyk, is haar oë nat. “Die Here weet wanneer elke mens hemel toe gaan. Ek dink dis my beste antwoord.”

Sierra tik met haar vingers op haar been. Haar mamma se woorde voel nie juis soos ’n antwoord nie. “Is dit hoekom hy nie op dieselfde tyd as Katy se pappa doodgegaan het nie?”

“Sierra, wanneer het Katy hieroor begin praat? Wat het julle hieroor laat praat?”

“Die helms.”

Nou lyk mamma se oë soos wanneer sy naar voel. Sy praat in ’n sagte, geskokte stem. “Die veiligheidshelms?”

Haar pa se brandweerhelm staan op haar spieëlkas. Dis nou skoon, maar dit was baie vuil van die brand waarin Pappa dood is. Dit staan langs ’n foto van haar en Pappa wat geneem is toe hy van die hospitaal af gekom het. Sy kop is vol verbande, en hy het krukke. Dis ’n spesiale foto, nes al die foto’s wat

Sierra van haar pappa het. Maar die helm is die heel spesiaalste van al die goed in Sierra se kamer. Katy het ook een.

“Daar.” Sierra wys na die helm. “Katy het ook een op haar spieëlkas.”

“Ja.” Haar mamma maak ’n hoersgeluid. “Want Katy se mamma voel net soos ek voel. Dat julle twee julle pa’s se brandweerhelms moet hê.”

“Dis nie wat ek bedoel nie.” Sierra skud haar kop. Haar maag is nog ’n bietjie seer, maar sy begin nou ongeduldig voel. “Katy sê hulle het hulle helms op dieselfde plek gekry. Toe hulle die Twin Towers opgeruim het.”

Haar ma kyk na haar en knip haar oë. Dan leun sy vooroor en gee haar ’n baie lang drukkies. Toe sy Sierra laat gaan, sê haar oë baie duidelik dat hulle klaar gepraat het. “Sierra, dis te laat om nou te gesels.” Sy gee vir haar ’n vlindersoentjie soos Pappa altyd gemaak het. “Kom ons praat môre hieroor.”

“Môre is Sondag. Ek gaan vir Katy by die Sondagskool sien, en sê nou sy praat weer daaroor? Wat moet ek dan vir haar sê?”

Haar mamma kyk af en sê baie saggies: “Help my, Here.” Sierra verstaan nie. Hoekom moet die Here haar mamma help om so ’n maklike vraag te antwoord? Dan kyk haar ma op en sê: “Kom ek en jy gaan hou môre sommer ons eie kerk op die strand, Sierra.”

“Op die strand?”

“Ja.” Haar mamma se ken bewe ’n bietjie. “Net ek en jy. Ons sal na dieselfde strand toe gaan waarnatoe ek en Pappa jou altyd geneem het, oukei?”

“Gaan dit nie te koud wees nie?”

“Tien teen een.” Mamma glimlag half. “Ons sal warm aantrek en ons stoele saamvat. Dan kan ons Bybel lees en bid en lekker gesels.”

“Oor die helms?” Sierra is nie seker of sy so lank kan wag nie, én sy wil vir Katy sê dat sy verkeerd is. Dis glad nie weerd nie. Maar die storie van die helms maak nog steeds nie sin nie.

“Ja, oor die helms.”

“En kan ons dan na Katy toe gaan?”

“Ja, dit ook.”

Sierra se maag begin stadigaan beter voel. Want selfs al moet sy wag, sal sy ten minste die antwoord kry. Sy sal nie meer vrae hê oor haar pappa of hoekom hy nie in die Twin Towers dood is of hoekom Katy sê dat hulle sy helm langs haar pappa se helm gekry het nie.

Ná môre gaan alles sin maak.

Jamie trek die deur toe en maak dit skaars tot by haar bed voordat sy op haar knieë neerval. “Here!” Haar stem is ’n fluistering deurdrenk met ontsteltenis en vrees en desperaatheid. “Ek is nie gereed hiervoor nie!”

Hierdie keer is daar nie ’n heilige boodskap nie, nie ’n sagte, stil stem wat haar verseker dat God daar is nie.

Sy het altyd geweet dat dit hierop sou neerkom, dat sy Sierra eendag sal moet vertel dat haar pa in die terroriste-aanvalle dood is. Maar nou weet sy nie hoe sy dit gaan regkry nie. Dit voel onmoontlik om te verduidelik dat die man vir wie Sierra lemoensap aangedra het, die man by wie sy gesit het, saam met wie



sy gesing het en stories gelees het nie haar pa was nie, maar 'n vreemdeling. In die jare daarna het Jamie altyd gedink dat sy sou weet wanneer die tyd reg is. Maar sy het nie verwag dat dit so gou sou wees nie. Die feit is, sy het gehoop dat sy nie vir Sierra sou hoef te vertel voordat sy 'n tiener, dalk so agtien, was nie. Sodoende sou haar dogter slegs 'n vae herinnering aan die tyd in haar lewe hê toe Eric Michaels by hulle gebly het.

Maar nou? Terwyl sy steeds die foto van die man op haar spieëltafel het?

Sy het die afgelope drie jaar waarskynlik duisende kere daarna gekyk en nou, môre op die strand, gaan sy vir Sierra moet sê dat die man op die foto nie haar pappa is nie.

*Ek wil vir haar sê, Here ... Sy laat haar kop hang. Wat's fout met my? Ek moes al lank terug iets gesê het.*

Haar knieë word seer. Sy kom stadig orent en val op haar bed neer. Haar eie vroeë eggo deur haar kop totdat 'n antwoord tot haar begin deurdring. Sy wil nie vir Sierra vertel nie, want syself wil dit nog glo. Dit is die probleem. Dit was die drie moeilikste maande van haar lewe, en om Eric Michaels daar te hê en te glo dat hy Jake was, was die enigste rede waarom sy oorleef het.

Die Here het geweet dat sy net soos die torings sou verkrummel as sy daardie week moes hoor dat Jake een van die slagoffers was. Dus het Hy 'n plaasvervanger vir haar gebring. Jake se ewebeeld.

Toe sy uitvind dat hy nie Jake was nie, het sy hom gehelp om sy ware identiteit te ontdek. Daarna het hy na sy vrou en seun toe teruggegaan, maar iewers in haar binneste word sy steeds vertroos deur die wete dat sy Jake drie maande langer gehad het as wat Sue vir Larry gehad het, as wat enige van die ander brandweer-weduwees hulle mans gehad het.

Om Sierra die waarheid te vertel, sal maak dat daardie herinneringe nie meer troos bring nie. Want die man in die herinnering was nie Jake nie, maar 'n vreemdeling. As sy geforseer word om die situasie met die waarheid in te kleur, sal daardie herinnering skokkend wees. Hoe kon sy Jake en Eric verwar het? Wat is *fout* met haar? Hoe kon sy met 'n vreemdeling sit en praat en saam met hom eet en lag terwyl sy die hele tyd gedink het hy was Jake?

Al is daar 'n deel van haar wat vir Sierra die waarheid wil vertel, is dit makliker om te hou by die manier waarop sy dit tot dusver hanteer het.

Sy het Jake drie maande lank teruggehad, al het hulle nie die fisiese intimiteit van vroeër gedeel nie. En toe het hy oornag in iemand anders verander, iemand met 'n gesin in Los Angeles. Voordat hy sy vrou en seun opgespoor het, het sy gewens dat hy nooit sou nie, dat sy hom op die een of ander manier hier kon hou. Selfs nadat sy hom gehelp het om by sy gesin uit te kom, selfs by die lughawe waar sy vrou hom kom haal het, wou Jamie hom aan die hand gryp en saam met hom weghardloop.

Maar dit sou verkeerd wees. In die eerste plek het die man by sy gesin gehoor; tweedens was hy nie Jake nie.

Selfs nou voel dit asof Jake by hulle was. Eric het so goed daarin geslaag om Jake se Bybel en dagboek te bestudeer dat hy mettertyd al hoe meer soos Jake

geklink en selfs opgetree het. Hy het selfs geleer om Sierra se hare in te draai soos Jake dit gedoen het.

Hy was in elke opsig soos Jake. Maar hy was nie Jake nie.

Met Eric Michaels het Jamie God se vrede soos nooit tevore ervaar nie. Sy het hom daardie laaste dag agternagekyk, hom met haar oë gevolg toe hy na sy vrou toe gegaan en haar vasgehou het. Toe het Jamie omgedraai en nooit weer teruggekyk nie. Sy het haar belofte gehou en net vir Sue en Aaron vertel. Aan die begin het die media dikwels geskakel, maar sy het die verhaal met niemand gedeel nie.

Jamie staar na die plafon. Wat het sy gedoen? Was haar poging om die Eric Michaels-hoofstuk af te sluit so suksesvol dat sy vergeet het om haar emosies te verwerk? Sy het ineengestort toe hulle die bloedtoets gedoen het, toe hulle besef het dat hy nie Jake was nie. Maar haar hartseer was oor die feit dat sy Jake verloor het, nie omdat sy geglo het dat 'n vreemdeling haar man was nie. Sy kyk na die horlosie. Dis kwart voor tien; Sue sal nog wakker wees. Die koordlose foon lê op die bedkassie, soos gewoonlik nie op sy laaier nie. Jamie pons Sue se nommer in.

Haar vriendin antwoord amper dadelik. "Hallo?"

"Sue ... " Jamie se stem is gesmoord.

"Jamie?"

"Ja, ek ... Sue, kan jy vir my bid?"

"Wat's fout?" Sue klink dadelik besorg. "Jy klink ontsteld."

Jamie se longe voel seer en sy besef dat sy haar asem ophou. Sy blaas haar asem uit en stoot haar vingers deur haar haarwortels. "Dit was 'n lang dag."

"Was jy nie saam met Aaron en Sierra uit nie?"

"Ja." Jamie maak haar oë toe. "Dis nie die probleem nie."

Sue wag. "Wat dan?"

"Ek dink die dogtertjies het gesels en Katy het vir Sierra gesê dat die reddingswerkers Jake en Larry se helms saam in die oorblyfsels van die Twin Towers gekry het."

"Wat?" Sue klink geskok. "Waar op aarde sou sy dit gehoor het?"

"Ek weet nie. Dalk het sy ons eendag hoor praat, of dalk het iemand anders vir haar gesê. Dis in elk geval nie die punt nie. Katy is reg; ek blameer haar nie dat sy vir Sierra gesê het nie."

"Het Sierra jou daaroor uitgevra?"

"Ja." Jamie maak haar oë oop, sit regop en glip uit die bed. Sy weet nie waarheen om te gaan nie; dus bly sy net bewegingloos daar staan. "Sy wou weet waarom Katy se pa in die Twin Towers dood is en haar pappa nie. En toe wou sy van hulle veiligheidshelms weet."

"Ag tog." Sue sug. "Ek's so jammer, Jamie. Jy het dit nie nou nodig nie."

"Dis oukei. Dit moes die een of ander tyd kom, en lyk my die Here wil hê dit moet nou wees."

"Wat gaan jy doen?"

"Vir haar die waarheid vertel." Jamie loop stadig na die hoë kleedtafel, die

een wat Jake s'n was. Sy Bybel en dagboek lê bo-op waar sy hulle maklik kan kry as sy nodig het om haar in sy hart, sy gedagtes, sy geloof te verloor.

“Ag, Jamie, geen wonder jy wil hê ek moet bid nie.”

Jamie se oë brand, maar sy skop teen die trane. Sy plaas een hand op Jake se Bybel. Sy kan die Here langs haar, binne haar voel. Hoe Hy oor haar die wag hou en waak, selfs al het sy Hom nie vanaand met haar hoor praat nie. Hy is hier en Hy sal haar deur die volgende dag dra. “Ja, dis hoekom.”

“Ek sal die hele dag bid. Bel my wanneer jy gereed is om daaroor te praat, oukei?”

“Oukei.” Jamie streel oor die Bybel se verslete leeromslag. “Dankie. En wie weet. Dalk sal dit ons albei goeddoen.”

Hulle groet en Jamie druk die rooi knoppie. Sy gooi die foon op die bed en tel Jake se Bybel op. Met haar oë op die voorblad, op die dowwe plek waar die goud van sy gegraveerde naam feitlik heeltemal afgekom het, retireer sy totdat sy aan die skommelstoel raak wat nog altyd in hulle kamer was.

Sy gaan sit en maak die ou boek by een van haar geliefkoosde gedeeltes oop. Filippense hoofstuk vier vers dertien. Sy blaai versigtig, haar oë liefkosend op die onderstreepte gedeeltes en die kosbare aantekeninge wat Jake in die kantlyn gemaak het.

Haar oë val dadelik op die Skrifgedeelte.

*Ek is tot alles in staat deur Christus wat my krag gee.*

Sy kyk deur die venster na die ou olmboom. Dis donker, maar Jamie kan die blare in die aandluggie sien ritsel. Sy het buitekant gesit terwyl Sierra gespeel het toe sy die eerste keer op hierdie vers afgekom het. Sy mediteer vir 'n oomblik oor die woorde. *Ek is tot alles in staat deur Christus wat my krag gee.*

Sy kyk weer na die bladsy asof om die woorde in te drink sodat sy die volgende oggend daaraan kan vashou. Maar pleks van om die vers oor Jesus se krag te sien, val haar oë op vers vier. Jake het die volgende paar reëls met 'n blou merkpen onderstreep. Jamie kan nie onthou dat sy die gedeelte al gelees het nie.

Sy skreef haar oë sodat sy die woorde duideliker in die gedempte lig kan sien.

*Wees altyd bly in die Here! Ek herhaal: Wees bly! Wees insiklik teenoor alle mense. Die Here is naby. Moet oor niks besorg wees nie, maar maak in alles julle begeertes deur gebed en smeking en met danksegging aan God bekend. En die vrede van God wat alle verstand te bowe gaan, sal oor julle harte en gedagtes die wag hou in Christus Jesus.*

Dis nie een vers nie, maar vier. Vier wonderlike reëls met 'n hoopvolle waarheid wat haar met nuwe lewe vul. Wat haar die meeste raak, is die feit dat die Here naby is. Is dit nie presies hoe sy gevoel het terwyl sy met Sue gepraat het nie? Dat die Here regtig naby is?

En watter raad gee Hy aan sy kinders se angstige harte? Wees bly! Soek na 'n rede om bly te wees, en moenie angstig raak nie. Bid, en God, omdat Hy goed

is, sal jou 'n vrede gee waarvan die wêreld nie weet nie.

Jake het 'n dun swart strepie van die vers na 'n gekrabbelde aantekening bo-aan die bladsy getrek. Dis vir haar die lekkerste van Jake se Bybel. Die woorde wat hy bygevoeg het, gee haar 'n insig wat sy nie gehad het toe hy nog gelewe het nie.

Sy skuif sodat sy meer lig het.

*God wil hê almal moet insiklik en sagmoedig wees, selfs ons as brandweermanne. Die rede? Hy is nader as wat ons dink.*

Jake was 'n ongelooflike man, sterk en dapper en teer. Maar soms, soos nou, wens sy dat sy hom net nog een keer kan sien om vir hom te sê hoeveel dit vir haar beteken dat hy so 'n padkaart vir haar en Sierra gelos het. Ja, Jake is reg; God is nader as wat hulle dink.

Sy maak die Bybel toe en hou dit teen haar bors. *Jake ... as jy maar net kon weet hoe ek na jou verlang.* Haar trane kom en hierdie keer probeer sy hulle nie keer nie. *Ek ken jou nou soveel beter.*

Sy bly 'n rukkie so sit, verbeel haar dat Jake in die kamer is. Dat hy in die bed lê en slaap, gereed vir sy vroegoggendskof. As sy maar net tussen die lakens kon inkruip en hom vir oulaas daar kry, sy asem warm teen haar gesig. Op sulke nagte, as sy hard genoeg dink, kan sy amper voel hoe hy in sy slaap beweeg, hoe hy sy arm om haar sit en haar soos die veiligste, mees geliefde vrou in die wêreld laat voel.

Sy maak haar oë oop en kyk weer deur die venster.

Sedert 11 September het God haar deur elke dag gedra; Hy sal haar ook in die gesprek met Sierra lei. Sy gaan bêre Jake se Bybel weer op die kas, borsel haar tande en klim in die bed. Voor sy aan die slaap raak, koers haar gedagtes na die afgelope dag: die uitstappie na Chelsea Piers, hoe sy dit geniet het om by Aaron te sit.

Maar toe sy aan die slaap raak, is daar iets anders wat haar laat glimlag.

Ná môre sal Sierra weet wat regtig met haar pa gebeur het; sy sal niks meer hoef weg te steek nie. Sy sal haar dogtertjie eenvoudig vertel hoe haar pa regtig dood is, en dan daar wees vir haar.

Die heel beste is dat die Here by haar sal wees. Sy sal nie net deur die verse wat sy gelees het, versterk word nie, maar ook deur die woorde wat Jake self geskryf het. En dis amper soos om Hom daar te hê.

## Chapter NINE

The beach was cold, just like Sierra thought. But it wasn't rainy, and that was a good thing. Rainy days were better for inside, cuddled up near the fire with Mommy and Wrinkles. She didn't care about the weather; just that Mommy would finally tell her about the weird thing Katy said about her daddy and his helmet. She was dying to make sense of it all.

Mommy was driving. She turned the car into the parking lot, and Sierra sat a little straighter so she could see. Yep, it was their favorite beach. The one they came to last summer with Katy and her mommy. But it looked different with winter on it, not as blue and happy. The water was ice gray and the sand looked wet. "You sure it won't be too cold?"

"If it is, we won't stay long, okay?" Mommy smiled at her. She reached out and took Sierra's hand. "I've always wanted to come out here in the winter, before the snow comes, all by ourselves."

Sierra peered down the beach a ways. "There's two people in chairs there, Mommy. And three over by the water."

Her mommy did a little laugh. "I don't mean all by ourselves, exactly. I mean without the summer crowds."

"Oh." Sierra wiggled her nose. She could already smell the seawater.

The car stopped and Mommy squeezed her hand. "Okay, let's go." Mommy took the picnic basket and the big Bible, the one that belonged to her daddy before he died in the fire. She also took two chairs from the back of the van and a big, bushy blanket, the warmest kind they had.

Sierra grabbed her pink Bible and pulled her coat tight around her middle. Out on the sand it wasn't as cold as she thought. A medium sort of cold, but that's all. Plus the sky was the bluest blue. The seagulls looked like white kites against that sky.

She pushed her feet over the sand and kept up with Mommy. They already had a plan. Sierra would read something favorite from her Bible, and then Mommy would read something favorite from hers. Well, not

really hers, but sort of hers. She always read the Bible that *used* to be Daddy's.

The more they got close to the water, the more Sierra started to remember. This was the place they came a year after Daddy died. They brought a balloon that day. Sierra squinted at the water. She gave butterfly kisses to the balloon and wrote something on it. A message for Daddy. Yep, that was it.

This was the same exact place.

She stopped, and after a few steps, her mommy stopped too.

"Sierra?" Her eyes had sun in them so she made a shade with her hands. "What's wrong, honey? You need a rest?"

It was a long way from the car to their spot near the water. But she wasn't tired. "No."

"Okay, then..." Mommy sounded curious and maybe a little confused. "Come on. Let's set up."

"I'm sad."

Her mommy's face got melty. "Sad? Why, honey?"

"Because this is where we sent the balloon to Daddy when I was in kindergarten."

A lonely breath came from her mommy. "Yes. You remember that?"

"Mhmm." She started walking again. Her mommy did too. "I was just a little kid, but I remember a lot. Even now that I'm grown-up."

"Yes." Her mommy bit her lip. "I remember too. And you're right, honey. It is sad."

A few more steps and her mommy set down the chairs and basket. But not the Bible. Sierra helped her open the chairs. They sat down and Mommy spread the blanket over their legs. With their coats and the blankets, it was actually sort of snuggly warm.

Sierra looked out at the water. "It's kind of happy too."

"What?"

"Being here." She gave her mommy her best smile she could. "I think

Daddy can see us in this place, all the way from heaven.”

“Yes.” Her mommy’s eyes got small. She looked out at the water. “Yes, Sierra, I think there must be windows in heaven. And I’ll bet you’re right; I’ll bet Daddy is up there smiling at us right now.”

Heaven was a long ways away, but Sierra liked to try to see it. She made a shade over her eyes and stared straight into the blue. For a long time she just looked and didn’t say anything. The seagulls and the waves did all the talking.

“Sierra?” Her mommy scooched her chair over closer. Now their arms were touching. “Ready to read your favorite verse?”

“Yes.” She pulled her children’s storybook Bible out from beneath the snugly blanket and turned to the story about Peter and his friends in the boat one stormy night. She was an excellent reader. That’s what everyone said. She looked at the first words and did a cough so her voice could say them.

“One day Peter and his friends were in a boat in the middle of the night.” She used her finger to follow along, but it wasn’t hard. This story was one she read to Wrinkles all the time. “A storm came up and Peter saw a man out on the water. “Who is it?” Peter asked. The man on the water said, “It is me, Peter.” Peter was very amazed. The man on the water was Jesus. “If it is you, Lord, tell me to walk on the water...””

Sierra made a tired sound. She needed a little rest. A seagull landed close by because he wanted to listen to the story. She laughed out loud at the bird.

“What’s so funny?” Mommy did a little laugh too.

“That seagull.” Sierra pointed at him. “He wants to listen to the story.”

“Hmmm.” Her mommy raised her eyebrows at her. Raised eyebrows meant Come on sillypants, get back to reading. “I’d like to listen to the story too.”

Sierra looked out at the ocean and took a big breath. “I’m doing good,

huh, Mommy?”

“Very good. I can’t wait to hear the rest.”

A big smile came on Sierra’s face, because Mommy was funny. “Okay, here it is.” She found her place on the page. “‘Jesus said, ‘Peter, come to me.’ So, Peter went out of the boat and came to Jesus on top of the water. But when he saw the wind and big waves he began to sink. He held his hand out to Jesus. ‘Help,’ he cried. Then Jesus helped Peter out of the water. He said, ‘Peter, you need to have more faith.’”” She closed her pink Bible. “The end.”

“Nice job, honey. I like it.” Mommy was quiet for a little bit. “What’s your favorite part?”

“The part about Jesus helping Peter out of the water.”

“Why that part?”

“Because sometimes...” Sierra closed her eyes and listened to the waves. She kept them closed, even when she started talking again. “I hate not having a daddy. No one to swing me around or give me horseback rides or curl my hair or anything.” She opened her eyes and looked at Mommy. “I hate it so much.” She leaned her head back so she could see the sky again. “Sometimes I miss my daddy so much I feel like I’m drowning. Just like Peter. But then I reach for Jesus, and He helps me be okay.”

“I’m sorry, Sierra.” Her mommy’s voice was full of sad.

“About what?” It wasn’t Mommy’s fault.

“I’m sorry you don’t have a daddy. I can only tell you I miss him as much as you do.”

“Probably more, ’cause you knew him longer.”

“Yes.” Her mommy’s smile was still very sad. “Probably more.” The sound in her voice was like when sometimes she was going to cry. But her eyes were dry when she opened the big Bible and turned some pages. “This is a Scripture your daddy gave me, long before I even knew Jesus.”

“You mean when me and Daddy used to go to church by just ourselves?”



“Right.” Mommy made a frown. “Back then.” She looked at the pages and started to read. “It’s from Jeremiah 29:11. It says, “‘For I know the plans I have for you,” says the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.”””

Sierra nodded. “I’ve heard that before. I like it.”

Her mommy closed the Bible but kept it on her lap. Then she put the blanket back over them. “I wanted to read that because you and I need to have a little talk, Sierra. I want to answer your questions from last night, okay?”

“Okay.” Sierra’s stomach did a somersault. ‘Cause this was the big answer, actually. Mommy’s voice was serious, only that didn’t make sense. Because Katy didn’t know that every person has a time when they die. At least that’s what Mommy said. So that meant Katy’s daddy had September 11, and her own daddy had another day. That’s all. She squiggled her toes in her shoes and waited.

“Whatever we talk about here, I want you to remember that Bible verse, Sierra. God has a plan for you and He has a plan for me. Sometimes strange things happen and God can make them into something good, all right?”

“Yes.” Sierra held tight to the arms of her chair. “Can you tell me now?”

Her mommy nodded. “Let’s pray first. That way we can end our Bible study.”

“Okay.”

She took hold of Sierra’s hand and looked out where heaven was. “God, we are so glad You’re always there for us, that when we fall, You pick us up. Even when it feels like we’re drowning.” Her voice sounded sad again. “Right now I ask You to be with Sierra, so she can understand what I’m about to tell her. Give me the right words. Be with both of us, Lord. We need You. In Jesus’ name, amen.”

When she was finished she looked at Sierra. Her eyes were the same

as they were last summer when Sierra woke up one morning and Mommy told her some sad news. That their old dog Brownie died in her sleep. Yes, her eyes were the same now. Sierra liked the way her mommy's hand felt around her smaller one. "I'm ready now."

"Okay." Her mother took in a long breath. "Sierra, Katy is right about Daddy. He did die in the Twin Towers, just like her daddy."

Sierra frowned. She stared at her mommy. Why would she say that? The pieces of her heart felt all mixed up.

Mommy looked a long time at her. "After the towers fell down, Captain Hisel was walking around and he saw a man who looked like your daddy." She stopped and looked up. Then she whispered, "God...help me. This is harder than I thought."

That was a problem. Whenever Mommy prayed in the middle of talking it was a problem. She swallowed. "It's okay, Mommy. I want to know."

"Anyway, they took that man to the hospital, and told me it was your daddy. He was hurt and he had bandages on his face, but he looked...he looked exactly like your daddy, Sierra. Exactly. But he wasn't Daddy. He was a man named Eric Michaels. A man who—"

"That's not true!" Sierra pulled her hand away from her mommy and crossed her arms tight. "He was *so* my daddy! He gave me horseback rides and curled my hair and made me blueberry pancakes." Her tummy hurt very bad now. "He *was* my daddy, Mommy. Maybe you got your story wrong."

"Sierra..." She had a strange sound this time, like she was scared. "I *promise* I'm telling you the truth. You *thought* he was Daddy, and I thought he was Daddy. I was shocked when I found out he wasn't Daddy. But, Sierra, Daddy died in the Twin Towers. That man—Eric Michaels—was from California. He only *looked* like Daddy." Tears broke into her voice and made it scratchy. She did a few sobs and covered her face for a long time. When she looked up she was more sad than Sierra had ever seen

her. "Can you believe me, honey? Please?"

She had to think about this, actually. Before she could answer her mommy's question, she needed a little time for her brain to work. "I want to walk for a minute, okay?"

"Okay." Her mommy sat back in her chair. New tears were in her eyes, but she didn't sound as sad.

Sierra pushed the blanket off, set her Bible down, and walked down the little hill to the water. It was colder there, but she didn't care. How could it be true? How could Daddy have been someone else for all that time? She scrunched down the way they did in gym class sometimes, sort of sitting but not touching the sand with her bottom. Her head felt all swishy inside, but Sierra knew one thing.

Mommy never lied to her. She might wait a long time to tell the truth, but she never lied.

Never.

So if Mommy wasn't lying then it had to be true. The daddy who came home from the hospital wasn't her daddy. Sierra felt sick, the way she felt when they served tuna casserole for hot lunch. Even if it was true, her head was still all mixed up.

She stood and walked up the hill, careful not to get sand in her tennis shoes. When she got there she put her hands on her hips, because this was very serious business. "The man who lived with us in the downstairs bedroom? He wasn't Daddy?"

Mommy's eyes were still wet and a few tears spilt onto her coat. "No, honey. Your daddy died in the towers right next to Katy's daddy."

"That's why they found the helmets together?"

"Yes, that's why."

"So he gave me horsie rides and curled my hair, but he wasn't my daddy?"

"No, sweetheart. He really wasn't."

Sierra sat back down in her chair, picked up her Bible, and pulled the

blanket up around her. All of a sudden she thought of something, something that took away some of the sick feeling in her stomach. She looked at her mommy. “Then that daddy who lived with us is still alive, right?”

“Yes, but he—”

“I know! Let’s find him and he can be my second daddy! James in my class—remember James?”

“Sierra, you don’t understa—”

“His daddy was a firefighter and he died in the Twin Towers, but now his mommy got married again and he has a second daddy. Isn’t that nice for James, Mommy?”

“No, Sierra, it’s not like that. The man who—”

“So maybe that man who looked like my daddy could be my second daddy.” She made a sad face. “He would never be my special first daddy, because no one could ever be him.” Her smile came back, just a little. “But that man was very nice, Mommy. I liked him a lot, even if he wasn’t my real daddy. He looked like Daddy and he seemed like Daddy. So now you can go find him and marry him and we can be a family like when he was here.” Sierra was out of air so she breathed in real fast. “Could you do that, Mommy? I really like him and plus, he’s alive.”

Mommy pulled her arms out from under the blanket and put them on her knees. Then she put her head down on them, like maybe she was tired. She stayed that way a long time, and also her shoulders did a little shaking.

“Mommy?”

Her fingers covered her face, and she sat up straight. Then she wiped her tears and let her hands fall back to the blanket. Her cheeks were almost as red as her eyes. “No, Sierra.” She looked at her really close. “It can’t be like that. It can *never* be like that. The man who lived with us—Mr. Michaels—didn’t have his memory because his head got hurt in the towers. Everyone told him he was our daddy, and even he thought so. But then he got better and he found out he wasn’t our daddy. That’s when he left to find

his real family.”

Sierra didn’t want to hear those words. “His real family?”

“Yes. His real family.”

Sierra stared at her lap. Maybe that was why he left, and that was when—

She looked at her mommy. “When he went away...that’s when you told me about Daddy dying in the fire, right?”

“Right.” Her mommy’s eyes still had wet in them. “I’m sorry, Sierra. I should’ve told you a long time ago, but I didn’t know how or when.” She sniffed and wiped her eyes again. “I’m so sorry, baby. I just didn’t know how to say it.”

Sierra looked at the sand and made her brain think very fast. When she looked up she had an idea. “Are you sure that other daddy has a different family?”

“Yes, honey. They live in California.”

“Oh.” Sierra stretched her feet out and thought some more. “Can I see him sometime?”

Her mother’s breath came out long and she looked very tired. She shook her head. “No, Sierra. We can’t see him.”

Sierra didn’t like that very much—but she did like that at least she had a second daddy for a little bit of time. That was more than Katy had. She stared out at the water. The daddy she really wanted was her own daddy. She looked to heaven, and little tears came into her eyes. At least Daddy was with Jesus. Plus, one day they’d be together again.

“Are you okay, honey?” Her mommy reached for her hand, and Sierra let her take it.

“I think so.” Two seagulls danced around a piece of bread a little bit away from them. She yawned and held tight to her mommy’s fingers. “Can I keep his picture in my room?”

“Honey, why?” Mommy’s mouth dropped open. A wave came up and smashed onto the sand at the bottom of the hill. Mommy made a huffy

sound. “I told you, he wasn’t your daddy. Not even for a little while.”

“Yes, Mommy. He was my *second* daddy. For that little bit of days he was my second daddy.” Sierra rubbed her thumb over her mommy’s hand. “So, can I keep the picture?”

Her mommy waited. “I don’t know, Sierra...”

“Please, Mommy.”

“Oh—” her shoulders dropped a little bit—“Okay. I guess so.”

“Thank you, Mommy. I can remember him better with the picture.” One hand was still in hers. With the other one, she tapped on her Bible. She wasn’t sick anymore, but she was still a little bit sad. “Guess what, Mommy?”

“What?”

“I like it better that Daddy died in the Twin Towers. Know why?”

“Why?” Her mommy snuggled close to her and their two heads came together like best friends.

“Because Teacher said the firefighters who died on September 11 were heroes. And Daddy was a hero, that’s why.”

“Sierra...” Her mother made a funny sound. Not really a laugh or a cry. “All people who die in the line of duty—firefighters, police officers, soldiers, missionaries—all of them are heroes.”

“But you know what, Mommy?”

“What?”

“Our daddy was a superhero.” She stretched her hands out as wide as she could. “The biggest superhero of all. Right?”

She could hear a smile in her mommy’s voice. “Yes, honey, he was.” She gave Sierra another little hug. “He was the best superhero of all.”

## Nege

Dis koud op die strand, nes Sierra gedink het. Maar gelukkig is dit nie reënerig nie. Op reënerige dae is dit beter om binnekant te wees, by Mamma en Wrinkles voor die kaggel. Eintlik pla die weer haar nie; sy is net bly dat

Mamma haar uiteindelik gaan verduidelik wat Katy oor haar pa en sy helm gesê het. Sy brand om alles te verstaan.

Mamma bestuur. Sy draai by die parkeerterrein in en Sierra sit 'n bietjie regop sodat sy kan sien. Jip, dis hulle lekkerste strand. Die een waar hulle saam met Katy en haar mamma kom swem het. Maar dit lyk anders in die winter, nie so blou en gelukkig nie. Die water is ysgrys en die sand lyk nat. “Is Mamma seker dit gaan nie te koud wees nie?”

“As dit is, sal ons nie lank bly nie, oukei?” Mamma glimlag vir haar. Sy neem Sierra se handjie. “Ek wou nog altyd in die winter kom, voor dit begin sneeu, sommer net ek en jy.”

Sierra bespied die strand. “Daar sit twee mense op stoele, Mamma. En daar is drie by die water.”

Mamma gee 'n vinnige laggie. “Ek bedoel nie heeltemal alleen nie. Ek bedoel net sonder die baie mense wat in die somer hier is.”

“O.” Sierra wikkel haar neus. Sy kan alreeds die seewater ruik.

Mamma hou stil en gee haar hand 'n drukkie. “Nou toe, kom ons klim uit.”

Mamma neem die piekniekmandjie en die groot Bybel, die een wat Pappa s'n was voordat hy in die brand dood is. Sy haal ook twee strandstoele agter uit die motorbussie en 'n groot wolkombers, die warmste een in die huis.

Sierra vat haar pienk Bybel en trek haar jas vaster om haar lyf. Buite is dit nie so koud soos sy gedink het nie. 'n Medium soort koue, maar dis al. En die lug is die blouste blou. Die seemeue lyk soos wit vlieërs in die lug.

Sy loop met groot treë agter Mamma aan. Hulle het alreeds 'n plan. Sierra sal iets waarvan sy baie hou, uit haar Bybel lees, en dan sal Mamma iets uit hare lees. Wel, nie regtig hare nie, maar soort van. Sy lees altyd uit die Bybel wat eers Pappa s'n was.

Hoe nader hulle aan die water kom, hoe meer begin Sierra onthou. Hulle het hiernatoe gekom toe Pappa 'n jaar dood was. Hulle het daardie dag 'n ballon saamgebring. Sierra kyk deur skrefiesoë na die water. Sy het die ballon 'n vlindersoentjie gegee en 'n boodskap daarop geskryf. Vir Pappa. Ja, eintlik onthou sy goed.

Dit was op presies dieselfde plek.

Sy gaan staan en ná 'n paar treë gaan Mamma ook staan.

“Sierra?” Die son skyn in haar oë en sy maak 'n skaduwee met haar hande.

“Wat's fout, my skat? Wil jy 'n bietjie rus?”

Dis nogal ver van hulle kar tot by hulle plek op die strand. Maar sy is nie moeg nie. “Nee.”

“Oukei ... ” Mamma klink nuuskierig en dalk 'n bietjie verbaas. “Nou kom. Ons is amper daar.”

“Ek's hartseer.”

Haar mamma se gesig word sag. “Hartseer? Hoekom, my liefie?”

“Want dit is waar ons die ballon vir Pappa gestuur het toe ek in die kleuterskool was.”

Haar mamma sug hartseer. “Ja. Onthou jy dit?”

“Mmmhmm.” Sy begin weer loop. Haar mamma ook. “Ek was nog klein, maar ek onthou baie. Selfs noudat ek groot is.”

“Ja.” Haar mamma byt op haar lip. “Ek onthou ook. En jy is reg, skapie. Dit is hartseer.”

Ná nog ’n paar treë sit haar mamma die stoele en mandjie neer. Maar nie die Bybel nie. Sierra help haar om die stoele op te slaan. Hulle gaan sit en Mamma gooi die kombers oor hulle bene. So met hulle jasse en die kombers is dit eintlik snoesig warm.

Sierra kyk uit oor die water. “Maar dis ’n bietjie lekker ook.”

“Wat?”

“Om hier te wees.” Sy glimlag op haar mooiste vir haar ma. “Ek dink Pappa kan ons hier op die strand sien, al die pad van die hemel af.”

“Ja.” Haar mamma se oë raak klein. Sy kyk na die water. “Ja, Sierra, ek dink daar moet vensters in die hemel wees, en ek wed jou jy is reg; ek is seker Pappa is daar en hy glimlag vir ons.”

Sy weet die hemel is baie ver, maar Sierra wil probeer om tot daar te kyk. Sy maak ’n skaduwee oor haar oë en kyk reguit op in die lug. Vir ’n lang ruk kyk sy net sonder om iets te sê. Die seemeeue en branders doen al die praatwerk.

“Sierra?” Haar mamma skuif haar stoel nader. Nou raak hulle arms aan mekaar. “Is jy gereed om jou Bybelvers te lees?”

“Ja.” Sy haal haar Kinderbybel onder die kombers uit en blaai na die storie waar Petrus en sy vriende een stormnag op ’n boot was. Sy is ’n uitstekende leser. Dis wat almal sê. Sy kyk na die eerste woorde en gee ’n hoesie sodat sy hulle kan sê.

“Een nag was Petrus en sy vriende op ’n skuit.” Sy gebruik haar vinger om te lees, maar dis nie moeilik nie. Sy het hierdie storie al baie kere vir Wrinkles gelees. “Daar was ’n storm en Petrus het ’n Man op die water gesien. ‘Wie is dit?’ het Petrus gevra. Die Man op die water het gesê: ‘Dit is Ek, Petrus.’ Petrus was baie verbaas. Die Man op die water was Jesus. ‘Jesus, as dit U is, sê dat ek op die water moet loop ...’”

Sierra maak ’n moeë geluid. Sy moet eers ’n bietjie rus. ’n Seemeeu land ’n klein entjie van hulle af, want hy wil na die storie luister. Sy lag hardop vir die voël.

“Wat is so snaaks?” Mamma gee ook ’n klein laggie.

“Daai seemeeu.” Sierra wys na hom. “Hy wil ook na die storie luister.”

“Hmmm.” Haar mamma trek haar wenkbroue op. Opgetrekte wenkbroue beteken: Toe nou, lawwe lyf, lees verder. “Ek wil ook na die storie luister.”

Sierra kyk na die see en haal diep asem. “Ek lees goed, nè, Mamma?”

“Baie. Ek kan nie wag om die res van die storie te hoor nie.”

Sierra glimlag lekker, want Mamma is snaaks. “Oukei, hier gaan ek.” Sy kry haar plek op die bladsy. “Jesus het gesê: ‘Kom na My toe, Petrus.’ Petrus het uit die skuit geklim en op die water na Jesus toe geloop. Maar toe hy die wind en die groot golwe sien, het hy begin sink. Hy het sy hand na Jesus uitgesteek. ‘Help,’ het hy geroep. Toe het Jesus Petrus uit die water gehelp. Hy het gesê:



“Petrus, jy moet meer geloof hê.” Sy maak haar pienk Bybel toe. “Die einde.” “Jy lees goed, my skat. Dit was mooi.” Mamma is eers ’n bietjie stil. “Wat is jou gunsteling-gedeelte?”

“Daar waar Jesus vir Petrus uit die water help.”

“Hoekom daardie gedeelte?”

“Want partykeer ... ” Sierra maak haar oë toe en luister na die branders. Sy hou hulle toe, selfs toe sy weer begin praat. “Dis aaklig om nie ’n pappa te hê nie. Niemand wat my swaai of laat perdjie ry of my hare indraai of niks nie.” Sy maak haar oë oop en kyk na Mamma. “Dis aaklig.” Sy laat sak haar kop agteroor sodat sy die lug kan sien. “Partykeer verlang ek só erg na my pappa dat dit voel of ek verdrink. Net soos Petrus. Maar dan roep ek na Jesus, en dan help Hy my om oukei te wees.”

“Ek’s jammer, Sierra.” Haar mamma se gesig is nou baie hartseer.

“Waaroor?” Dis nie Mamma se skuld nie.

“Ek’s jammer dat jy nie ’n pappa het nie. Al wat ek kan sê, is dat ek net soveel na hom verlang soos jy.”

“Dalk ’n bietjie meer, want Mamma het hom langer geken.”

“Ja.” Haar mamma se glimlag is nog steeds baie hartseer. “Dalk meer.” Haar stem klink soos partykeer wanneer sy gaan huil. Maar haar oë is droog toe sy die groot Bybel oopmaak en begin blaai. “Pappa het hierdie gedeelte vir my gegee, nog lank voordat ek Jesus geken het.”

“Mamma bedoel toe ek en Pappa altyd alleen kerk toe gegaan het?”

“Dis reg.” Mamma frons. “In daardie tyd.” Sy kyk na die bladsy en begin lees. “Dit kom uit Jeremia 29:11. Daar staan: ‘Ek weet wat Ek vir julle beplan, sê die Here: voorspoed en nie teenspoed nie; Ek wil vir julle ’n toekoms gee, ’n verwagting!’”

Sierra knik. “Ek het dit al gehoor. Dis ’n mooi deeltjie.”

Haar mamma maak die Bybel toe, maar los dit op haar skoot. Dan trek sy die kombers weer oor hulle. “Ek wou daardie gedeelte lees, want ek wil met jou gesels, my skat. Ek wil jou vraag van gisteraand beantwoord, oukei?”

“Oukei.” Sierra se maag slaan bollemakiesie. Want die groot antwoord gaan nou kom. Sy verstaan net nie mooi hoekom Mamma se stem so ernstig is nie. Katy weet nie dat elke mens ’n dag het wanneer hy doodgaan nie. Dis altans wat Mamma gesê het. Dit beteken dat Katy se pappa 11 September het, en haar pappa ’n ander dag het. Dis al. Sy wikkkel haar tone in haar skoene en wag.

“Wat Mamma nou ook al vir jou gaan sê, ek wil hê jy moet hierdie Bybelvers onthou, Sierra. God het ’n plan vir my en vir jou. Soms gebeur daar vreemde goed wat ons nie verstaan nie, maar die Here kan hulle in iets goeds verander, verstaan jy?”

“Ja.” Sierra hou styf aan die stoel se armleunings vas. “Gaan Mamma nou vir my vertel?”

Haar mamma knik. “Kom ons bid eers om ons Bybelstudie af te sluit.”

“Oukei.”

Sy neem Sierra se hand en kyk op na waar die hemel is. “Here, ons is so dankbaar dat U altyd daar is vir ons, dat U ons optel wanneer ons val. Selfs wanneer dit voel of ons verdrink.” Haar stem klink weer hartseer. “Ek wil U nou vra om by Sierra te wees. Help haar om te verstaan wat ek nou vir haar gaan vertel. Gee asseblief vir my die regte woorde. Wees by ons al twee, Here. Ons het U nodig. In Jesus Naam, amen.”

Toe sy klaar is, kyk sy na Sierra. Haar oë lyk net soos laas somer toe Sierra een oggend wakker geword het en Mamma hartseer nuus vir haar gehad het. Hulle ou hond Brownie het in haar slaap doodgegaan. Ja, haar oë lyk nou weer so. Sierra hou daarvan as haar handjie in Mamma s’n toegevou is. “Ek is nou gereed.”

“Nou goed.” Haar ma trek haar asem diep in. “Sierra, Katy was reg oor Pappa. Hy is daardie dag in die Twin Towers dood, nes haar pappa.”

Sierra frons. Sy staar na haar mamma. Hoekom sal sy so iets sê? Haar hart voel heeltemal deurmekaar.

Mamma kyk lank na haar. “Nadat die torings neergestort het, het kaptein Hisel rondgeloop en ’n man gesien wat net soos jou pappa lyk.” Sy bly stil en kyk op. Dan fluister sy: “God ... help my. Dis moeiliker as wat ek gedink het.” Daar is ’n probleem. Altyd wanneer Mamma in die middel van haar sinne bid, is daar ’n probleem. Sy sluk. “Dis oukei, Mamma. Ek wil weet.”

“In elk geval, hulle het daardie man hospitaal toe geneem en vir my gesê dat dit Pappa was. Hy het baie seergekry en daar was verbande om sy kop, maar hy het ... hy het presies soos Pappa gelyk, Sierra. Presies. Maar hy was nie Pappa nie. Sy naam was Eric Michaels. Hy het ... ”

“Nee!” Sierra trek haar hand weg en vou haar arms styf om haarself. “Hy wás my pappa! Hy het my laat perdjie ry en my hare ingedraai en plaatkoekies gemaak.” Haar maag is nou baie seer. “Hy wás my pappa, Mamma. Dalk maak Mamma ’n fout.”

“Sierra ... ” Daar is nou ’n ander klank in haar stem, asof sy bang is. “Ek *belowe* jou ek praat die waarheid. Jy het gedink hy is Pappa, en ek het gedink hy was Pappa. Ek was geskok toe ek uitvind dat hy nie Pappa was nie. Maar Pappa is in die Twin Towers dood, Sierra. Daardie man – Eric Michaels – het van Kalifornië af gekom. Hy het net soos Pappa gelyk.” Haar stem breek van die trane. Sy snik ’n paar keer met haar hande oor haar gesig. Toe sy opkyk, is sy hartseerder as wat Sierra haar al ooit gesien het. “Kan jy my glo, my skat? Asseblief?”

Sy moet eers ’n bietjie dink. Voordat sy Mamma se vraag kan antwoord, het sy eers ’n bietjie tyd nodig sodat haar brein kan werk. “Ek wil net eers ’n bietjie gaan stap, oukei?”

“Oukei.” Haar mamma sit agteroor. Daar is nuwe trane in haar oë, maar sy klink nie meer so erg hartseer nie.

Sierra stoot die kombes af, sit haar Bybel neer en loop afdraande na die water toe. Dis kouer daar, maar sy gee nie om nie. Hoe kan dit waar wees? Hoe kon Pappa iemand anders gewees het? Sy gaan sit op haar hurke. Haar kop voel

dronkerig, maar van een ding is Sierra seker.

Mamma het nog nooit vir haar gejok nie. Dalk wag sy 'n lang tyd om die waarheid te vertel, maar sy jok nooit nie.

Nooit, ooit, ooit nie.

En as Mamma nie jok nie, moet dit waar wees. Die pappa wat van die hospitaal af gekom het, was nie haar pappa nie. Sierra voel naar, soos sy voel wanneer hulle tuna-kasserol by die skool eet. Selfs al is dit waar, is haar kop nog baie deurmekaar.

Sy staan op en loop terug, versigtig om nie sand in haar skoene te kry nie. Toe sy voor Mamma staan, sit sy haar hande op haar heupe, want dit is 'n baie ernstige saak. “Die man wat by ons in die onderste kamer gebly het? Hy was nie Pappa nie?”

Mamma se oë is nog nat en 'n paar trane val op haar jas. “Nee, my skat. Jou pappa is saam met Katy se pappa in die torings dood.”

“Dis hoekom hulle hulle helms langs mekaar gekry het?”

“Ja, dis hoekom.”

“So hy het vir my laat perdjie ry en my hare ingedraai, maar hy was nie my pappa nie?”

“Nee, liefste. Hy was regtig nie.”

Sierra gaan sit weer op haar stoel, tel haar Bybel op en wikkel haar weer toe in die kombers. Dan dink sy skielik aan iets, iets wat haar maag glad nie meer naar laat voel nie. Sy kyk na haar mamma. “Die oom wat by ons gebly het ... hy lewe nog, nè?”

“Ja, maar hy ... ”

“Ek weet! Kom ons gaan kry hom, dan kan hy my tweede pappa wees! James in my klas – onthou Mamma van James?”

“Sierra, jy versta.. – ”

“Sy pappa was 'n brandweerman wat in die Twin Towers dood is, maar nou het sy mamma weer getrou en hy het 'n tweede pappa. Dink Mamma nie dis lekker nie?”

“Nee, Sierra, dit kan nie so werk nie. Die man wat – ”

“Dalk kan die man wat soos my pappa lyk, my tweede pappa wees.” Haar gesig raak hartseer. “Hy sal nooit my spesiale eerste pappa wees nie, want niemand kan hy wees nie.” Sy glimlag weer effens. “Maar daardie oom was baie gaaf, Mamma. Ek het baie van hom gehou, selfs al was hy nie my regte pappa nie. Hy het soos Pappa gelyk en gevoel. Nou moet ons hom net kry en Mamma moet met hom trou en dan kan ons weer 'n gesin wees soos toe hy hier was.” Sierra moet vinnig 'n bietjie asem skep. “Kan ons nie dit doen nie, Mamma? Ek hou regtig van hom en hy lewe ook nog.”

Mamma haal haar arms onder die kombers uit en sit hulle op haar knieë. Dan laat sak sy haar kop op hulle asof sy moeg is. Sy bly lank so sit, en haar skouers bewoos 'n bietjie.

“Mamma?”

Haar ma se vingers is oor haar oë toe sy weer regop sit. Toe vee sy haar trane

af en haar hande val weer op die kombers. Haar wange is amper so rooi soos haar oë. “Nee, Sierra.” Sy kyk van naby in haar oë. “Dit kan nie so wees nie. Dit kan nóóit so wees nie. Die man wat by ons gebly het – meneer Michaels – kon aan die begin niks onthou nie, want hy het seergekry in die torings. Almal het vir hom gesê dat hy ons pappa is, selfs hy het so gedink. Maar toe het hy gesond geword en uitgevind dat hy nie ons pappa was nie. Ons het uitgevind dat hy al die tyd ’n regte gesin gehad het.”

Sierra wil dit nie hoor nie. “’n Regte gesin?”

“Ja. ’n Regte gesin.”

Sierra kyk na haar skoot. Dis seker hoekom hy weggegaan het, en toe het ... ” Sy kyk na haar mamma. “Toe hy weggegaan het ... is dit toe wat Mamma vir my gesê het dat Pappa in die brand dood is?”

“Ja.” Haar mamma se oë is nog steeds tranerig. “Ek’s jammer, Sierra. Ek moes jou al lankal vertel het, maar ek het nie geweet hoe of wanneer nie.” Sy snuif en vee oor haar oë. “Ek’s so jammer, liefste. Ek het net nie geweet hoe om dit te sê nie.”

Sierra kyk na die sand en probeer baie vinnig dink. Toe sy opkyk, het sy ’n idee. “Is Mamma seker die ander pappa het ’n ander gesin?”

“Ja, my skat. Hulle bly in Kalifornië.”

“O.” Sierra strek haar bene uit en dink nog ’n bietjie. “Kan ek vir hom gaan kuier?”

Haar ma blaas haar asem lank uit en sy lyk baie moeg. Sy skud haar kop. “Nee, Sierra. Ons kan hom nie sien nie.”

Sierra hou nie baie daarvan nie – maar sy is bly dat sy ten minste vir ’n klein rukkie ’n tweede pappa gehad het. Dis meer as wat arme Katy gehad het. Sy kyk na die water. Die pappa wat sy eintlik wil hê, is haar eie pappa. Sy kyk op na die hemel en haar oë brand. Ten minste weet sy dat Pappa by Jesus is. En eendag gaan hulle weer bymekaar wees.

“Is jy, oukei, my liefie?” Haar mamma steek haar hand uit en neem Sierra s’n.

“Ek dink so.” Twee seemeene dans om ’n stukkie brood ’n entjie van hulle af. Sy gaap en hou haar mamma se vingers styf vas. “Kan ek sy foto in my kamer hou?”

“My skat, hoekom?” Mamma se mond gaan ’n bietjie oop. ’n Brander spoel oor die sand onder die skuinste. Mamma gee ’n sug. “Ek het vir jou gesê, hy was nie jou pappa nie. Nie eens vir ’n klein rukkie nie.”

“Ja, Mamma. Hy was my twééde pappa. Vir daai klein rukkie was hy my tweede pappa.” Sierra vryf met haar duim oor haar mamma se hand. “Kan ek maar die foto hou?”

Haar mamma wag. “Ek weet nie, Sierra ... ”

“Asseblief, Mamma.”

“Oukei.” Haar skouers sak ’n bietjie. “As jy wil.”

“Dankie, Mamma. Ek sal hom beter onthou met die foto.” Haar een hand is steeds in haar Mamma s’n. Met die ander een tik sy op haar Bybel. Sy voel nie meer naar nie, net ’n bietjie hartseer. “Raai wat, Mamma?”

“Wat?”

“Ek hou meer daarvan dat Pappa in die Twin Towers dood is. Weet Mamma hoekom?”

“Hoekom?” Haar ma skuif nader aan haar en hulle koppe kom bymekaar soos beste vriendinne.

“Want Juffrou het gesê die brandweermanne wat op 11 September dood is, was helde. En Pappa was ’n held, dis hoekom.”

“Sierra ... ” Haar ma maak ’n snaakse geluid. Nie regtig ’n lag of ’n huil nie.

“Al die mense wat dood is terwyl hulle ander mense help – brandweermanne, polisiemanne, soldate, sendelinge – hulle almal is helde.”

“Maar weet Mamma wat?”

“Wat?”

“Ons pappa was ’n superheld.” Sy maak haar arms wyd oop. “Die beste superheld in die hele wêreld. Nè?”

Sy kan ’n glimlag in haar ma se stem hoor. “Ja, my skat, hy was.” Sy gee vir Sierra ’n klein drukkie. “Hy was ’n superheld.”

# Chapter TEN

The plane couldn't go fast enough for Clay.

It was Halloween—not that a wasted holiday like that meant much—but it was the last Sunday in October, and Joe Reynolds was beside him. The adventure was underway. On the following afternoon they'd be in orientation for the course. Now that he'd said his good-byes to Eric and Laura and Josh, now that he'd made his mind up that somehow God was doing something in his life, Clay couldn't wait to get to New York.

Reynolds felt the same way. The first hour of the flight they guessed at what the training might include, talked about a kidnapping case from a year ago that Reynolds had worked, and speculated about the outcome of a robbery case that was still open.

Small talk, really.

Clay looked out the window. Funny how a person could go years thinking someone was his friend and never really know him. Reynolds was in the middle, sandwiched between Clay and a big man on the aisle. When they ran out of things to talk about, Reynolds nodded off. He'd been sleeping ever since.

The main thing Clay wanted to ask was, why New York? There were twenty cities where they could've gone for training. San Diego, for instance, where the weather was at least warm, or Phoenix, which would be heaven this time of year. The man didn't make impulsive decisions, as far as Clay could tell, so why New York? And what about the picture on his desk, the one of the pretty woman and the little boy? The one he never talked about?

The flight attendants came through with lunch, and Clay elbowed Reynolds. "Time to eat."

His friend opened one eye and then the other. He stretched as much as he could and pulled his tray down. "Gourmet, no doubt." He grinned at the young woman serving them. "Are you single?"

The woman was a redhead with striking caramel eyes. Clay looked at her left ring finger; it was bare. He could've gladly strangled Reynolds for what he figured he was about to say.

The flight attendant returned the smile, but her cheeks turned red as she gave Reynolds his meal. "Who wants to know?"

Reynolds punched Clay in the shoulder. "My single friend here, that's who." Reynolds looked from the flight attendant to Clay, then back again. "He's handsome, wouldn't you say? The flight won't last forever—it's late and getting later."

Clay held up his hands and gave a shake of his head, as if to tell her he was definitely not the instigator.

"Yes." The woman was still blushing. She made eye contact with Clay, but only for a few seconds. Clay couldn't blame her; he was thirty-five and she looked ten years younger.

Clay gave Reynolds a kick. He caught the flight attendant's attention and gave her a weak smile. "Don't mind my friend. He's delusional when he first wakes up."

The flight attendant laughed and pushed the food cart down a few aisles. Twice she looked back and caught Clay's eyes. When she was busy helping another passenger, Clay turned and stared at his friend. "Reynolds, remind me not to go out in public with you when we're in Manhattan."

Reynolds held up his hands in mock surrender. "Just trying to help. My friend can't seem to connect with the ladies...I figured I could make something happen."

"Yeah, well, figure not." Clay looked at his meal. It had the look of lasagna, but it smelled suspiciously of fish. He caught his friend's eyes again. "I'll meet someone soon enough."

Reynolds chuckled. "I'm not sure."

They poked at their meals and took a few bites. "You taste any fish in that stuff?"

"No." Reynolds sniffed close to his plate. "But I smell it." He pointed

to a small dish of something white. “Could be the warm cottage cheese.”

“Mmmm.” Clay put his fork down and wiped his mouth. “I think we were lucky to get a meal at all.”

Reynolds pointed to a few passengers across the aisle with Subway sandwich bags. “Those are the lucky people, man, let me tell you.”

They ate what they could, and after the flight attendant filed back to clear their trays, they shared a comfortable silence. Clay looked out the window again. It was another hour before they arrived in New York, and night was trying to fall on the East Coast. Several thousand feet below was a layer of puffy white clouds, but otherwise the sky was starting to turn colors—deep blues with streaks of lavender and pink.

God’s artwork.

“Beautiful.” Reynolds was leaning forward, watching the sunset.

“Yep. Only God can paint a sky.”

Reynolds settled back in his seat. “You a believer?”

“Longtime believer.” Clay sat back too. Funny, but the two had never talked about God before. “What about you?”

“Pretty much.” Reynolds stroked his chin and his eyes grew soft. “Not like I used to be.”

Clay let that sit. After a few seconds he leaned against the window and looked at Reynolds. “I got a question for you.”

“Shoot.”

“Why New York?”

The shadows that fell over his friend’s eyes told him he’d hit a nerve. Reynolds looked past Clay to the sunset. Lines appeared at the corners of his eyes. “You wouldn’t believe it if I told you.”

So there *was* a reason. Clay kept his voice low. “Try me.” He thought about his brother, Eric. “I’ve seen some pretty strange things.”

At first it didn’t look like Reynolds would talk, but maybe because they were suspended between two cities, thirty thousand feet above the ground, he gave in. Reynolds made his lips into a tight straight line and



began to tell his story.

“Her name’s Wanda. She’s the girl in the picture on my desk.” He sucked in a breath and held it before letting it ease through his nose. “I was crazy in love with her from the moment I met her—our senior year of high school.”

Clay knew Reynolds tended to spit out details in starts and fits, so he waited.

“After high school, I joined the service so I’d have a way through college.” He stroked his chin again. “Wanda went with me, lived with me on the base. A year later she had Jimmy and everything, well—” He let out a little laugh, one that lacked humor. “Everything was great until the Gulf War.”

“You fought?” Another surprise.

“Yeah, I fought. I was in the first wave, the ground attack.” The muscles in his jaw flexed. “It was crazy.” His tone was soft, but intense. “That sissy guy you shot the other day? That was nothing to the Gulf War, man. Nothing.”

“How long?”

“I was there the better part of three years.” He made a sharp sniff. “Came home and found Wanda and Jimmy having dinner at the cafeteria with one of the commanders.” He looked out the window again. “I came unglued. Stormed out of there, straight to our apartment.”

“Did she see you?” Clay had no trouble picturing Reynolds angry; that’s how he worked. Angry and focused.

“Yeah, she saw me. Flew after me with Jimmy running behind her. I heard her, heard both of ’em. Wanda calling my name, Jimmy shouting for his daddy.” Reynolds shook his head. “I was so mad, I wouldn’t stop, wouldn’t turn around for nothing. Not even my little boy.”

Clay felt the tension in his friend’s voice. Whatever was coming, it wasn’t good.

“A road ran through the base, and I crossed it no trouble. Wanda...she

was twenty yards behind me, running like crazy. She got to the road just as some crazy drunk came flying up the hill.” He looked up at the airplane’s vents and shook his head.

“Hey, it’s okay, man.” Clay’s stomach tightened. He never would’ve asked about New York if he’d thought it would lead to this.

“No.” Reynolds looked at him again. “I’ll finish.” He searched Clay’s eyes. “Wanda saw the car and stopped in time, but Jimmy—” His voice broke, and he pinched the bridge of his nose. His words were barely audible over the sound of the jet engines. “He called my name one more time, and that’s when I heard the thud.” Reynolds dropped his hand back to his lap. Gone was the invincible look that made him a hero at the police department. His eyes were red and full of pain. “He was dead before he hit the ground.”

Clay’s stomach sank. No wonder there were no updated pictures of the boy on Reynolds’s desk.

“Watching that boy hit the ground...seeing Wanda kneel next to him, screaming for him to be okay...seeing that drunk stumble out of the car...” He bit his lip. “I still have nightmares about it.”

Clay wanted the rest of the story. What happened to Wanda? And how come they weren’t together any more? But he wasn’t going to push. He looked at his hands for a minute and then back at Reynolds. “I’m sorry.”

“It was an accident, I know that.” He crossed his arms. “But it was my fault. And you know what?”

“What?”

“Turns out the commander wasn’t seeing Wanda at all. He was asking her if we wanted an upgrade in our living quarters.”

Clay dug his elbow into his thigh and let his forehead rest on his knuckles. Reynolds was right; he never would’ve believed a story like that one, never would’ve thought a man as bulletproof as Joe Reynolds would’ve suffered such a loss.

“Guess we all have a story.”

The captain’s voice came over the speakers then, advising them of weather conditions in LaGuardia. Cold with a storm moving in.

Clay lowered his hands and looked at his friend again. He had to ask. “What happened to Wanda?”

“She couldn’t look at me, couldn’t talk to me.” He hesitated. “I mean, Michaels, she was crazy with grief. Absolutely crazy. Her baby was dead and it was my fault.” A sad smile hung on the corners of his mouth. “We had a strong faith back then; everyone at church tried to help us. After the service we got counseling, and the army gave me a paid leave.” He knit his mouth together and shook his head. “Wanda wanted none of it. A week later we found out the guy who hit Jimmy, he was a child molester out early for good behavior. Got himself drunk and crashed through the gate at the base.” Reynolds fired the words like bullets. “Never shoulda been out of prison in the first place.”

“I hate that.”

“Yeah.” He made a sarcastic sound that wasn’t even close to a laugh. “Talk about having an incentive to get to work.”

Now Clay understood something else. When Reynolds showed up on the scene, a minute after Clay had shot the carjacker the other day, his words had been something of a surprise. *You did us all a favor.* Wasn’t that it? Yes, that was what he’d said. *You did us all a favor.* Reynolds worked by the books, arresting criminals, forming cases against them, testifying in court. But when a killer made a fatal move in a gun battle with a cop, Reynolds wasn’t going to lose any sleep over it.

“For three months we kept trying, me and Wanda. She was hurting so bad, and there was—“ he gave a sharp shake of his head—“there was nothing I could do to help her. Finally one day I asked her if she wanted me to leave.”

Clay already knew what Reynolds was going to say and it made him sick. Two people who loved each other so much, who shared a faith in

God, torn apart when they were both hurting the most.

“She said yes. Seeing me every day, remembering what happened, it was too hard for her.” Reynolds’s eyes were distant again. “I told her I felt the same way; if she wasn’t going to let me help her, I wanted out too.” He shrugged. “So I finished my service in California and she moved to Queens. Soon as I had the chance I started college classes and I didn’t look back until I had my law degree. Figured I’d fight the bad guys in courtrooms, where I could lock ’em up longer than the jerk who killed my boy.”

“Didn’t work out that way, huh?”

Reynolds chuckled, and the hurt in his eyes dimmed. “Not for a minute. The whole thing was a game, Michaels. Just one big stinking game.” He straightened himself and buckled his seat belt. “I like it better in uniform. At least we get ’em off the streets for a while.”

A flight attendant came on this time, telling them to prepare for landing. Clay let the details of his friend’s story play again in his mind. “You and Wanda? You’ve kept in touch?”

“For a little while.” He looked at Clay. “She married a firefighter, FDNY. Guy wasn’t around much, at least that’s what Wanda’s mother said. She told me Wanda never stopped loving me; she just didn’t know how to show me after Jimmy died.”

Clay frowned. “Her husband was FDNY?”

“Yeah.” Something more serious crossed his expression. “After the terrorist attacks, I had to know if the guy was one of ’em.” He paused. “He was. Lost right up there in the South Tower. Every day since then I’ve wanted to call Wanda, just to tell her I’m sorry. Sorry about doubting her, sorry about running that day when I came home, sorry about Jimmy. Sorry about her husband.” His voice was shakier than before, broken. “Sorry about all of it. But I never made the call.”

“Instead you’re going to see her in person, is that it?”

The plane was coming in for a landing. Reynolds glanced out the

window at the skyline of Manhattan. “I’m not sure.” He looked at Clay again. “You’re a praying man, is that right?”

“I am.”

“Then pray for me. So I’ll know if I should look her up, or if seeing me again would only make things harder for her.”

They didn’t say anything else until they touched down and the pilot welcomed them to New York City. That’s when the idea hit him. He turned to Reynolds as he pulled his travel bag from the floor beneath the seat in front of him.

“Hey, we’re off tomorrow morning, right?”

“Right. Orientation begins at four o’clock. I guess a few of our shifts will be with the night crew.”

“Right, so I have an idea for the morning.”

“Okay.” Reynolds looked like he was back to himself again, with one small change for the better. His guard was down. “What’s your idea?”

“Ground Zero.”

Reynolds hesitated. “Hmmm.” He gave a slow, thoughtful nod. “Might be a good place to pray.”

“That’s what I was thinking. We could take the ferry over early.”

“Hey, I just remembered. One of the guys from the downtown precinct was telling me there’s this little chapel there, right across the street from where the towers stood. St. Peter’s, something like that. All sorts of letters and pictures from the attacks.”

“Now that—” Clay patted his friend’s back as they stood to make their way off the plane—“would be a good place to pray.”

## **Tien**

Die vlug kan vir Clay nie gou genoeg verbygaan nie.

Dis Halloween – nie dat ’n kommersiële vakansiedag veel beteken nie – maar dis die laaste Sondag in Oktober, en Joe Reynolds sit langs hom. Hulle avontuur het aangebreek. Môremiddag sal hulle die oriënteringssessie vir die

kursus bywoon. Noudat hy vir Eric en Laura en Josh totsiens gesê het, noudat hy besluit het dat God besig is om iets nuuts in sy lewe te doen, kan Clay nie wag om in New York te wees nie.

Reynolds voel dieselfde. Die eerste uur van die vlug het hulle bespiegel oor wat die opleiding gaan behels, gesels oor 'n ontvoeringsgeval waaraan Reynolds 'n jaar tevore gewerk het, en gespekuleer oor die hangende uitkoms van 'n rooftog.

Eintlik maar net koeitjies en kalfies.

Clay kyk deur die venster. Snaaks hoe 'n mens jare lank kan dink dat iemand jou vriend is en hom nooit werklik ken nie. Reynolds sit in die middel, vasgedruk tussen Clay en 'n groot man langs die paadjie. Toe hulle uitgesels was, het Reynolds ingesluimer. Hy het nog nie weer wakker geword nie.

Clay se grootste vraag is: Waarom New York? Daar is twintig stede waarheen hulle kon gaan vir opleiding. San Diego, byvoorbeeld, waar dit nie so koud is nie, of Phoenix, wat hierdie tyd van die jaar hemels sal wees. Sover hy weet, neem die man nie impulsiewe besluite nie. Waarom dan New York? En wat van die foto op sy lessenaar, die een van die mooi vrou en die klein seuntjie? Die een waaroor hy nooit praat nie?

Die lugwaardin bedien middagete en Clay pomp Reynolds sag in die ribbes. “Etenstyd.”

Sy vriend maak sy een oog oop en dan die ander. Hy strek effens in die beperkte ruimte en laat sak sy skinkbord. “Vliegtuigkos, my gunsteling.” Hy glimlag vir die jong vrou wat hulle bedien. “Is jy getroud?”

Die vrou is 'n rooikop met treffende bruin oë. Clay kyk na haar linkerringvinger; dis kaal. Hy kan Reynolds se nek omdraai oor wat hy waarskynlik nou gaan sê.

Die lugwaardin glimlag terug, maar sy bloos toe sy Reynolds se kos aangee. “Wie wil weet?”

Reynolds klop Clay op sy skouer. “My ongetroude vriend hier.” Reynolds kyk van die lugwaardin na Clay, dan weer terug. “Hy’s nogal nie onaantreklik nie, nè? Die vlug gaan nie vir altyd aanhou nie en dit word laat.”

Clay hou sy hande op en skud sy kop om vir haar te wys dat hy definitief niks met hierdie gesprek te doen het nie.

“Ja.” Die vrou bloos steeds. Sy maak oogkontak met Clay, maar net vir 'n paar sekondes. Clay kan haar nie blameer nie; hy is vyf-en-dertig en sy lyk tien jaar jonger.

Clay gee Reynolds 'n skop. Hy vang die lugwaardin se oog en glimlag flou. “Moet jou asseblief nie aan hom steur nie. Hy yl gewoonlik wanneer hy wakker word.”

Die meisie lag en stoot die trollie 'n paar rye verder. Sy kyk twee maal om en vang Clay se oog. Toe sy besig is om 'n ander passasier te help, draai Clay om en staar na sy vriend. “Reynolds, herinner my om nie saam met jou in die openbaar gesien te word as ons in Manhattan is nie.”

Reynolds lig sy hande in gemaakte oorgawe. “Ek probeer net help. My vriend

kom nie reg met 'n meisie nie ... ek't net gedink ek kan iets laat gebeur.”  
“Ja, wel, moenie dink nie.” Clay kyk na sy ete. Dit lyk na lasagne, maar ruik verdag baie na vis. Hy vang sy vriend se oog. “Ek sal wel een van die dae my vrou ontmoet.”

Reynolds gee 'n laggie. “Ek's nie so seker nie.”

Hulle krap hulle kos deurmekaar en neem 'n paar happe. “Proe jy enige vis?”  
“Nee.” Reynolds ruik aan sy kos. “Maar ek ruik dit.” Hy wys na 'n klein bordjie met iets wits. “Dalk is dit die warm maaskaas.”

“Mmmm.” Clay sit sy vurk neer en vee sy mond af. “Ons moet seker dankbaar wees ons kry iets om te eet.”

Reynolds wys na 'n paar passasiers aan die oorkant van die paadjie met toebroodjies. “Hulle was slim.”

Hulle eet wat hulle kan, en nadat die lugwaardin weer verbygekom en hulle oorskiet weggeneem het, kom lê daar 'n gemaklike stilte tussen hulle. Clay kyk weer deur die venster. Dis nog 'n uur voordat hulle in New York aankom, en dis besig om aand te word. 'n Paar duisend voet onder hulle is 'n laag watterige wit wolke, maar andersins is die lug nou in pienk, pers en oranje stroke geklee.

God se kunswerk.

“Dis ongelooflik.” Reynolds leun vorentoe en kyk na die sonsondergang.

“Jip. Net die Here kan die lug so inkleur.”

Reynolds sit weer agteroor. “Is jy 'n Christen?”

“Al baie lank.” Clay sit ook terug. Snaaks, maar hulle het nog nooit oor die Here gepraat nie. “En jy?”

“Ek ook.” Reynolds vryf oor sy ken en sy oë raak sag. “Maar nie soos vroeër nie.”

Clay laat dit vir eers daar. Ná 'n paar sekondes leun hy teen die venster en kyk na Reynolds. “Ek het 'n vraag vir jou.”

“Ek luister.”

“Waarom New York?”

Die skaduwee wat oor sy vriend se oë skuif, verklap dat hy 'n teer snaar aangeraak het. Reynolds kyk verby Clay na die sonsondergang. Daar verskyn lyntjies langs sy oë. “Jy sal my nie glo as ek jou sê nie.”

Daar is dus 'n rede. Clay praat sag. “Gee my 'n kans.” Hy dink aan sy broer, Eric. “Ek het al 'n paar vreemde goed in my lewe gesien.”

Aanvanklik lyk dit nie of Reynolds gaan praat nie, maar dalk omdat hulle dertig duisend voet bokant die grond tussen twee stede is, gee hy bes. Reynolds pers sy lippe saam en begin vertel.

“Haar naam is Wanda. Sy is die vrou op die foto op my lessenaar.” Hy trek sy asem in en hou dit vir 'n paar sekondes in. “Ek was dolverlief op haar vandat ek haar ontmoet het – in ons matriekjaar.”

Clay weet dat wanneer Reynolds iets vertel, dit gewoonlik in horte en stote kom; dus wag hy geduldig.

“Ná skool het ek besluit om deur die weermag te studeer.” Hy vryf weer oor

sy ken. “Wanda het saam met my gegaan, saam op die basis gebly. ’n Jaar later is Jimmy gebore en alles, wel ...” Hy gee ’n humorlose laggie. “Alles het goed gegaan tot die Golfoorlog uitbreek het.”

“Het jy gaan veg?” Nog ’n verrassing.

“Ja, ek’t geveg. Ek was van die eerste ouens.” ’n Spier in sy kakebeen spring.

“Dit was hel.” Sy stem is sag maar intens. “Daai kranksinnige ou wat jy nou die dag geskiet het? Dit was niks in vergelyking met die Golfoorlog nie. Niks nie.”

“Vir hoe lank?”

“Ek was vir amper drie jaar daar.” Hy snuif skerp. “Toe ek huis toe kom, het ek Wanda en Jimmy saam met een van die ander bevelvoerders in die kafeteria betrap.” Hy kyk weer deur die venster. “Ek was buite myself. Daar uitgestorm, reguit na ons woonstel toe.”

“Het sy jou gesien?” Clay kan hom ’n woedende Reynolds goed voorstel; dis hoe hy werk. Verbete en gefokus.

“Ja, sy het my gesien. Sy het agter my aangehardloop, met Jimmy agterna. Ek het haar gehoor, hulle albei. Wanda het my naam geroep, Jimmy het gehuil dat hy sy pappa wou hê.” Reynolds skud sy kop. “Ek was so kwaad, ek het net aanhou hardloop. Ek sou nie omdraai nie. Nie eens vir my klein seuntjie nie.” Clay hoor die spanning in sy vriend se stem. Hy vrees wat hy volgende gaan sê.

“Daar het ’n pad deur die basis geloop en ek het oorgehardloop. Wanda ... sy was twintig meter agter my en het voluit agter my aangehardloop. Toe sy by die straat kom, het ’n dronk vark aangejaag gekom.” Hy kyk op en skud sy kop.

“Hei, dis oukei.” Clay se maag trek op ’n knop. Hy sou Joe nooit oor New York uitgevra het as hy gedink het dit sou hiertoe lei nie.

“Nee.” Reynolds kyk weer na hom. “Ek wil aangaan.” Hy kyk ondersoekend in Clay se oë. “Wanda het die kar gesien en betyds gestop, maar Jimmy ...” Sy stem breek, en hy knyp sy neusbrug vas. Sy stem is skaars hoorbaar bo die vliegtuigenjin. “Hy het my naam nog ’n keer geroep, en toe hoor ek die slag.” Hy laat val sy hande op sy skoot. Daar is geen spoor van die ongenaakbare kyk wat van hom ’n held in die polisie maak nie. Sy oë is rooi en vol emosie. “Hy was dood voordat hy die grond getref het.”

Clay se maag draai. Geen wonder daar is nie ’n onlangse foto van die seuntjie op Reynolds se lessenaar nie.

“Ek het gesien hoe my seuntjie getref word ... hoe Wanda langs hom neersak, historiese gil dat hy moet bykom ... hoe die dronkaard uit die motor strompel ...” Hy byt sy lip vas. “Ek kry nog steeds nagmerries.”

Clay wil die res van die verhaal hoor. Wat het met Wanda gebeur? En hoekom is hulle nie meer bymekaar nie? Maar hy gaan hom nie pols nie. Hy kyk vir ’n paar sekondes na sy hande en dan weer na Reynolds. “Ek’s jammer.”

“Dit was ’n ongeluk, ek weet dit.” Hy vou sy arms. “Maar dit was my skuld.



En weet jy wat?"

"Wat?"

"Later moes ek uitvind dat daar niks tussen Wanda en die bevelvoerder was nie. Hy het haar bloot gevra of hulle ons woonkwartiere kon opgradeer."

Clay stut met sy elmboog op sy bobeen en laat sak sy voorkop op sy kneukels. Reynolds is reg; hy sou dit nooit geglo het nie, sou nooit kon dink dat so 'n koeëlvaste man soos Reynolds so iets oorgekom het nie.

"Ons almal het 'n storie."

Die kaptein se stem onderbreek hulle gesprek met 'n afkondiging oor die weerstoestande in LaGuardia. 'n Koue front is besig om in te beweeg.

Clay laat sak sy hande en kyk weer na sy vriend. Hy moet vra. "Wat het van Wanda geword?"

"Sy kon nie na my kyk nie, kon nie met my praat nie." Hy aarsel. "Ek bedoel, Michaels, sy was waansinnig van smart. Heeltemal waansinnig. Haar seuntjie was dood en dit was my skuld." 'n Hartseer glimlag trek aan sy mond. "Ons het 'n sterk geloof gehad; almal by die kerk het ons probeer help. Ná die begrafnis het ons vir berading gegaan, en die weermag het my betaalde verlof gegee." Hy maak sy mond toe en skud sy kop. "Wanda wou niks weet nie. 'n Week later het ons die ou gekry wat Jimmy doodgery het. 'n Kindermolesteerder wie se vonnis verkort is. Hy het homself dronk gedrink en deur die basis se hek gejaag." Reynolds se woorde is soos koeëls. "Hulle moes hom in die eerste plek nie vrygelaat het nie."

"Dis verskriklik."

"Ja." Hy maak 'n sarkastiese geluid wat nie eens naastenby 'n laggie is nie.

"Dit verklaar dalk my passie vir my werk."

Nou gaan daar nóg 'n lig vir Clay op. Toe Reynolds op die toneel verskyn 'n minuut nadat Clay die kaper geskiet het, was hy taamlik onkant gevang deur sy woorde. *Jy het ons almal 'n guns bewys.* Onthou hy reg? Ja, dis wat hy gesê het. *Jy het ons almal 'n guns bewys.* Reynolds hou by die reëls; hy arresteer misdadigers, ondersoek die sake teen verdagtes, getuig in die hof. Maar wanneer 'n moordenaar met 'n masjiengeweer op 'n polisiebeampte losbrand, en geskiet word, gaan Reynolds nie slapelose nagte daaroor hê nie.

"Ons het drie maande lank probeer, ek en Wanda. Sy het so seer gehad en ek was ..." Hy skud sy kop. "Daar was niks wat ek kon doen om haar te help nie. Op 'n dag het ek haar gevra of ek moes loop."

Clay weet alreeds wat Reynolds gaan sê en dit laat hom naar voel. Dit breek sy hart dat twee mense wat mekaar so liefgehad het, twee gelowiges, uitmekaargeskeur is toe albei op hulle stukkendste was.

"Sy het ja gesê. Om my elke dag te sien en te onthou wat gebeur het ... dit was te swaar vir haar." Daar is weer 'n ver kyk in Reynolds se oë. "Ek het vir haar gesê dat ek ook so voel; as sy my nie sou toelaat om haar te help nie, wou ek ook nie daar wees nie." Hy haal sy skouers op. "Ek het my dienstermyn in Kalifornië voltooi en sy het Queens toe getrek. Ek het so gou moontlik begin klasloop en nie teruggekyk voordat ek my regsgraad gehad het nie. Ek't

gedink ek sou die misdadigers in die hof aanvat en hulle langer toesluit as die vloek wat my seuntjie vermoor het.”

“Maar toe werk dit nie so nie?”

Reynolds gee ’n laggie en die pyn in sy oë vervaag. “Nie vir ’n oomblik nie. Die hele ding is ’n speletjie, Michaels. Net ’n verdomde speletjie.” Hy sit regop en gordel hom vas. “Ek dra eerder ’n uniform. Ten minste kan ons die strate vir ’n rukkie skoonhou.”

’n Lugwaardin se stem weerklink hierdie keer oor die mikrofoon om te sê hulle moet voorberei vir die landing. Clay dink aan alles wat sy vriend gesê het. “Jy en Wanda – het julle nog kontak?”

“Ons het vir ’n rukkie gehad.” Hy kyk na Clay. “Sy het met ’n brandweerman hier in New York getrou. Volgens Wanda se ma was die ou nie baie tuis nie. Sy het vir my gesê dat Wanda nooit opgehou het om vir my lief te wees nie; ná Jimmy se dood het sy net nie geweet hoe om dit vir my te wys nie.”

Clay frons. “Was haar man in New York in die brandweer?”

“Ja.” Sy gesig verstrak. “Ná die terroriste-aanvalle moes ek weet of die ou een van hulle was.” Hy bly stil. “Hy was. Het saam met sy span in die suidelike toring gesterf. Sedertdien wou ek Wanda elke dag bel, net om vir haar te sê dat ek jammer is. Jammer dat ek haar verdink het, jammer dat ek weggehardloop het toe ek daardie dag teruggekom het, jammer oor Jimmy. Jammer oor haar man.” Sy stem begin bewe. “Jammer oor alles. Maar ek kry myself nie sover om die foon op te tel en haar te bel nie.”

“En nou wil jy self na haar toe gaan?”

Die vliegtuig kom in om te land. Reynolds kyk deur die venster na die Manhattan-silhoeët. “Ek’s nie seker nie.” Hy kyk weer na Clay. “Jy glo seker in gebed, nè.”

“Beslis.”

“Bid dan vir my. Dat ek sal weet of ek haar moet gaan opsoek, en of dit dinge vir haar net nog moeiliker sal maak as sy my sien.”

Hulle is stil terwyl die vliegtuig neerstryk en die kaptein hulle in New York verwelkom. Dan tref dit hom. Hy draai na Reynolds toe hy sy sak onder die sitplek voor hom uithaal.

“As ek reg onthou, het ons môreoggend af, nè?”

“Ja. Die oriëntering begin vieruur. ’n Paar van ons skofte gaan tien teen een saam met die ouens wees wat nagskof werk.”

“Ek het ’n idee wat ons môreoggend kan doen.”

“Oukei.” Reynolds begin weer soos sy ou self lyk, maar met een klein positiewe verandering. Hy is nie meer so op sy hoede nie. “Wat dink jy?”

“Ground Zero.”

Reynolds aarsel. “Hmmm.” Hy knik nadenkend. “Dis dalk ’n goeie plek om te gaan bid.”

“Dis presies wat ek gedink het. Ons kan vroeg met die veerboot oorgaan.”

“Haai, ek onthou nou net. Een van die ouens wat in die middestad werk, het my van ’n klein kapelletjie vertel, blykbaar regoor die plek waar die torings

gestaan het. St. Peter's of so iets. Dis 'n soort gedenkplek met allerhande briewe en foto's van die aanval."

Clay klop sy vriend op die rug toe hulle opstaan om uit te beweeg. "Ideaal. Ek kan nie aan 'n beter plek dink om te gaan bid nie."

# Chapter ELEVEN

Jamie was looking forward to seeing Aaron on Monday.

She boarded the ferry at nine o'clock and took a seat inside. A storm had kicked up the night before and it was still sprinkling. The forecast included snow later in the week, and Jamie thought they might be wrong. With the weather outside, it might snow before lunchtime.

The inside of the ferry had two levels. Jamie took the first, which was practically empty; few tourists were willing to brave a day like this. Jamie settled into a corner seat and held her bag to her waist. Whitecaps covered the harbor, evidence the ride would be rougher than usual.

For the tourists' sake—if there were any—the captain was saying something about the sights, the part about the Statue of Liberty welcoming the masses, and Liberty Island being a symbol of freedom. Funny how she'd never really listened to the spiel before Jake died. When the two of them crossed the harbor, they were too caught up in their own conversation to notice much else.

Now she knew it by heart.

The ferry rocked and rolled, but Jamie wasn't worried. She'd crossed over in far worse conditions.

She looked around at the other people on the first level. Across the way were two guys—one blond, one black. They were goodlooking, tall and well built. Jamie wondered if they were coaches, maybe, or tourists meeting up with their wives.

Not far from her, three guys in their early twenties sat in a circle. They might've been college kids, but they looked a little shady. Probably actors. Lots of Broadway dreamers lived in Staten Island and commuted to Manhattan for a shot at a role. Now that she'd noticed them, though, she saw something else. Every now and then, one of them would smile at her or do something to catch her attention, and then whisper to his buddies.

*Strange...* Did she spill something? Was her zipper undone? She

glanced down at her white turtleneck sweater and dark jeans. No, everything looked fine. Just as she was about to look up she felt someone standing near her table.

“Excuse me.” The guy couldn’t have been even twenty-one. He had a baby face with freckles and a crew cut—but there was something hard about his eyes. “Are you on vacation?”

“Me?” Jamie looked around to make sure he was talking to her. Maybe it was some sort of practical joke.

“Yeah.” He glanced back at his buddies. Both of them were smiling at him, egging him on. “We’re here with our history class, headed for the Statue of Liberty.” He grinned, and two dimples cut into his face. “We, well, we wondered if you were a tourist. You know, by yourself. Maybe you might want to join us.”

Jamie resisted the urge to laugh out loud. It wasn’t a practical joke at all. This college kid was hitting on her! Her face grow hot. “You’re serious?”

“Sure.” The guy looked toward the bathrooms. “You’re by yourself, right?”

“Yes.” Jamie wasn’t offended. If anything, it made her feel good.

But before she could say anything else, the guy pushed into the spot beside her and put his arm around her. “Don’t say a word, got it?”

At his low, hissed words, Jamie’s heart slammed into double time. How could she have been so stupid? She never should have said she was alone. She should’ve gotten up as soon as he started talking to her.

“I’m armed, but I don’t want to hurt you, see?” He kept smiling, but his fingers jabbed into her shoulder.

She winced and tried to jerk free, but the guy’s friends stood and came over. One of them took the seat on her other side.

“Hey there, baby doll.” This one had dark hair. His eyes were bloodshot, and Jamie’s fear increased. *God, help me...they’ve got to be on something.* His sweatshirt said OSU Football.

“Leave me alone.” She hissed the words at the newest member of the group. “Go back to your seats or I’ll scream.”

“Do it, witch, and I’ll shoot you straight through the heart.” The freckle-faced kid laughed, and the rough sound made Jamie’s skin crawl. “We killed two people earlier this morning. We’ll kill you if you don’t do what we say.”

Jamie doubted he was telling the truth, but just then she felt something jab into her ribs.

“We’re serious, lady.” It was the third guy, the one with the baseball cap. “You’re ours for the day, whatever we want to do with you. Got it?”

“Yeah, and don’t make a scene, or we’ll shoot everyone on board.”

“God...” Jamie closed her eyes and tried to be still. It wasn’t possible. Her mind was racing too fast to make a plan. “Get me out of here, God.”

The crew cut laughed hard at that. “Oh yeah, God’ll show up here. Sure thing.”

His buddies joined in the laughter, and Jamie looked around the first level. Couldn’t someone see she was in trouble? Or was the laughter from the three men convincing the other passengers that she was part of their group, a bunch of friends having a great time together?

“Wait till you see what we’ve got planned for you, baby.” The football sweatshirt sneered the words up against her ear.

His breath smelled like marijuana, and she jerked away, repulsed. *God...help me out of this.* Her heart raced so fast she couldn’t catch her breath. The most logical way out was to scream or make a run for it. But what about the gun?

It was one thing to take her chances on her own. So what if they shot her? Seconds later she’d be in heaven with Jesus, being welcomed home by the husband she missed so badly. But she didn’t have only herself to think about.

She had Sierra.

And because of that, she couldn’t scream, couldn’t make a run for it.

Instead she had to think. The only passengers in sight were the two men across the way. If only they'd look at her, she could send some sort of signal with her eyes. Her captors wouldn't notice—two of them were slurring their words; none of them were paying her that much attention now that they had her trapped.

*Come on, God. Make one of them look at me. Please...*

At that moment, the blond man stood and headed toward them. He looked back at his black friend and pointed to the restrooms. This was it, the chance Jamie needed. He had to walk right past her! If only he'd look at her. He was tall with a square chin, and he looked strong enough to handle all three of the punks circled around her.

Jamie stared at him, blinking as hard as she could, willing him to look.

"So whatcha going to do to her when it's your turn?" The crew cut rattled off a string of expletives. He was so loud, he didn't see the blond man coming up along the aisle to his left. "My turn might not leave much. I better go last."

Suddenly the blond man stopped, pulled out a gun, and pointed it at the four of them. "Police, everyone freeze!"

Jamie couldn't believe her eyes. She had to be dreaming, but she wasn't. A second later the black man pulled out another gun and jogged over.

"You punks better get your hands up!" He glared at them. "Which one of you has the gun?"

All three of the young guys instantly put their hands in the air. "Hey, man," the crew cut kid forced a laugh. "We're just havin' a little fun. Come on, nothin' to get riled over."

"Sure." The blond officer pointed the gun straight at the guy and looked at Jamie. "Do you know these men?"

"No!" The word was more a cry than an answer. Jamie jerked away and hurried up next to the blond officer. She pointed at the dark-haired kid.

“Be careful! He’s got a gun!”

“We saw it.” Her protector took her hand with his free one and guided her behind him. “Stay there; I’ll cover you.”

With the blond still aiming his gun at the young men, the black officer moved in and grabbed the gunman. “Give me your weapon. Now!”

“Hey—” He managed a nervous chuckle, his hands still in the air. “It’s like my man Jason said, we’re just havin’ a little—”

“Give me the gun!” The officer’s voice left no room for negotiation.

Jamie could barely see the drama unfolding. Was it really happening? Had three guys tried to abduct her in broad daylight? And who were the police officers? Angels?

Her heart was still racing, but she felt safe behind the blond man. He was much bigger than she, and with his body covering hers, she knew she was safe. *Calm, Jamie...be calm. God’s with you; it’s okay.* She pictured Sierra and felt tears sting her eyes. If things had been different...

Jamie squeezed her eyes shut until the bad thoughts went away. She opened them and stared at the officer a few feet away. The situation was under control; the kid was going to give up his gun. God had given her a miracle, one that was still playing out in front of her.

“I said, give me the gun!” The black officer was angry now. His voice told all of them he was sick of the charade.

“Whatever.” It was the dark-haired kid. He snarled at his friends. “Look, I’m not going down for this.” He lowered one of his hands to his pocket.

“Slow!” The blond barked. He still held Jamie’s hand.

“Okay, man, okay.” The kid pulled the gun from his pocket and reached it out, slowly. His hand shook. “Take it, already.”

“Shut up!” The blond officer barked at him and turned to the others. “Any other weapons before we search you?”

A round of muted “No, sirs” came from the trio. All three of them had their hands in the air; none of them were laughing.



“Hold the cover.” The black officer glanced at his partner. Then he slipped his own gun back in his pocket, spun the dark-haired kid around and slammed him against the ferry wall. With rough, sharp movements he ran his hands along the kid’s sides. “You have the right to remain silent.” He jerked his hands up and down the guy’s chest. “Anything you say or do can and will be used against you in a court of law...”

Jamie’s hands and knees were shaking now, probably from the adrenaline. What were the odds that the only two other people on this level of the ferry were police officers? *Thank You, God...thank You.* Her heart rate was barely slower, though.

The blond officer leaned his head back, keeping his eyes on the other two kids. “Did they threaten you?”

“Yes.” Jamie tried to swallow but her throat was too dry. “They... they said they’d kill me if I screamed. They were going to rape me.”

The officer turned to his partner. “Did you hear that?”

“Loud and clear.” He finished frisking the kid and shoved him onto the bench. “Keep your hands in the air.”

He repeated the process with the other two, and found no weapons on either of them. Even so he took his gun out and kept it aimed at the trio. With a glance over his shoulder, he grinned at his partner. “Go tell the captain we’ve made us some friends down here.”

The blond officer laughed. He was still holding her hand, and now he motioned for her to follow him. They were halfway up the steps when he looked back at her. “I’m Officer Clay—”

The horn on the ferry blared, and Jamie strained to hear him.

“... from Los Angeles.”

“Clay Miles?” The wind was whipping on the upper deck and she had to shout to be heard.

“Yes,” he stopped at the top of the stairs and faced her. Even then it was hard to hear. “What’s your name?”

“Jamie Bryan.” She was safe now, and the fact that he still had her

hand in his felt...actually, Jamie couldn't figure what she felt. The man was tall, obviously strong, and rugged looking. All that and he'd just saved her life. "I don't know what to say."

Officer Miles let go of her hand and pointed to the captain's office. "Let's talk in there."

She nodded and followed him into the glassed-in area at the top of the ferry. He explained that he was a Los Angeles police officer and then told the man what had happened. They were almost at the Manhattan shoreline, but the captain called dispatch and found out the guys were wanted. They'd held up a convenience store at gunpoint before boarding the ferry. Police lost track of them and were about to contact the captain—in case they were aboard.

The captain held out his hand to Officer Miles. "Nice work." He shook his head. "You're on vacation from LA, is that it?"

"No. We're here for detective training in Manhattan. NYPD." He leaned against the glass wall and looked at Jamie. "We saw the suspects approach this woman, and my partner saw the gun."

Jamie wanted to run over and hug him. Instead she steadied her knees and gripped the back of the captain's chair. "They..." She looked straight into the officer's eyes. "You saved my life."

He grinned and shrugged one shoulder. "I guess the training started sooner than we expected."

The captain was on the phone, making arrangements to have an NYPD officer at the docks when the boat pulled up. He was saying something about stalling until the unit was on location.

"So, Jamie Bryan—" Officer Miles gazed out at the choppy water —"why're you going into Manhattan by yourself on a day like this?"

"I'm a volunteer. At St. Paul's." She met his eyes again. What was it about him? She'd never seen him before. At least, she didn't think she had. But something in his eyes made her feel as if she'd known him all her life.

The officer raised his eyebrows. "St. Paul's? You won't believe this.

That's exactly where we were headed."

"Really?"

"Yep." He angled his head and studied her. His eyes were beyond kind, the perfect compliment to the tough guy she'd seen a few minutes earlier. "We have the morning off. Orientation's this afternoon."

Jamie smiled. "I think you just had it."

"True." He laughed, much more relaxed than he'd been with the bad guys downstairs. A sober look filled his eyes. "The chapel, it's across the street from the pit, right?"

"Right." Their conversation was easy, and Jamie realized she was drawn to him. "You aren't an angel, are you?"

"I'm afraid not." He grinned. "Just a regular guy, warts and all."

Jamie didn't see any warts. "I prayed for help, and a minute later you had your gun out."

"Hmmm." He kept his gaze on hers, unblinking. "I prayed God would use me in New York however He saw fit."

The captain was still on the phone, but he'd put the ferry back into gear. They weren't far from the dock now, and Jamie saw three squad cars, lights flashing. She shuddered; how different things might have been if the officers hadn't been there.

"So...you believe in prayer, is that right, Officer—"

"Call me Clay." He slipped his hands in his jeans pockets. His leather jacket looked sharp against his beige oxford. "And yes. To tell you the truth, God's just about everything to me."

Her voice dropped a notch. "Me too."

"Is that why you volunteer at St. Paul's?"

"Sort of." It didn't seem right to talk about Jake. She would probably never see the guy after today. Why trouble him with her personal heartache? "How 'bout you?"

"My partner's got some stuff going on. It's a long story."

A gentle bump told them the ferry had reached the dock. The captain

picked up his radio and made an announcement to the passengers: “We are requesting all passengers stay seated; I repeat, all passengers please stay seated. A police matter has arisen and officers will need a few minutes to take care of the situation. Again, please stay seated.”

During the captain’s announcement, Jamie thought she saw Clay glance at her left hand. But it happened so fast, she wasn’t sure. What with the scene downstairs—and the inexplicable connection she felt to a total stranger—she had no doubt her imagination was working overtime.

The captain thanked Clay again and bid them good-bye. “I need to be downstairs when they take the suspects.”

“Fine, sir. Glad we could help.”

The captain left and they were alone.

“Do you need to go?” She looked again at the police officers scrambling out of their cars and heading for the ferry ramp.

“Nope. This isn’t our jurisdiction. We can stop a crime in progress, but after that it belongs to the locals.”

“I see.” Jamie should’ve thanked Clay for saving her life and proceeded to make small talk. But the feeling that she’d known him—known him well—wouldn’t go away. She studied her hands. “I’m still shaking.”

He closed the distance between them and, as naturally as if they’d been friends all their lives, pulled her into a hug. “I didn’t want to say anything.” He drew back and smiled at her. “You were flushed at first, but now...you’re white as a ghost.”

“I am?” She didn’t know why, but she didn’t want anything to interrupt the moment. “Even now? I’m still pale?”

“Mmhmm.” He put his hands on her shoulders. “Blow out a few times, long and slow, that should help.”

She did as she was told, and he studied her. “Do you feel lightheaded?”

“Maybe that’s it. I have this feeling I can’t explain.”

He still had his hands on her shoulders, watching her, making sure she was okay. “You’re looking a little better now.” His tone was polite, the public servant caught in a time of need.

But his eyes held more. Jamie wasn’t sure she’d ever get her color back under that blue gaze.

Another announcement came over the loudspeakers: “Thank you for being patient. It’s now safe to debark.”

Clay pulled back and nodded toward the door. “Can a couple of LA cops escort you to St. Paul’s?”

Jamie smiled. “Please.”

Clay grinned. “It’s late and getting later. Let’s go.”

They made their way back to Clay’s partner, Officer Joe Reynolds, and the three of them grabbed a cab and headed for St. Paul’s. They were halfway there when Jamie finally identified what she’d been feeling, the strange sensation that came over her when Clay held her behind his back, sheltering her from the suspects, then again when he pulled her into his arms. It wasn’t fear or shock or even light-headedness.

It was electricity.

## **Elf**

Jamie sien uit daarna om Aaron die Maandag te sien.

Dis negeuur toe sy aan boord van die veerboot gaan en binnekant gaan sit. Dit het die vorige nag swaar gereën, en dit drup nog steeds. Daar word sneeu vir later in die week voorspel, maar Jamie dink hulle is verkeerd. Te oordeel na hoe dit nou lyk en voel, gaan hulle vanoggend al sneeu sien.

Die binnekant van die veerboot bestaan uit twee vlakke. Jamie sit op die onderste, feitlik verlate dek. Bitter min toeriste sien kans om die stad op só ’n dag te trotseer. Jamie gaan maak haar in die hoek tuis en hou haar sak op haar skoot vas. Die hawe is vol skuimkopbranders, ’n teken dat die rit onstuimiger as gewoonlik gaan wees.

Ter wille van die toeriste – indien daar enige is – sê die kaptein iets van die besienswaardighede, dat die Vryheidstandbeeld die massas verwelkom en ’n simbool van vryheid is. Snaaks dat sy voor Jake se dood nooit regtig na die relaas geluister het nie. Wanneer hulle saam op die veerboot was, was hulle

gewoonlik te verdiep in hulle eie gesprek om na enigiets anders te luister.

Nou ken sy dit uit haar kop uit.

Die veerboot wieg en rol, maar Jamie is nie bekommerd nie. Sy het al baie erger weerstoestande tydens 'n oorvaart beleef.

Sy kyk rond na die mense op die eerste vlak. Oorkant haar is twee ouens – een blond, een swart. Albei is aantreklik, lank en goed gebou. Jamie wonder of hulle dalk sportafrigters is, of toeriste wat hulle vroue iewers kry.

'n Entjie van haar af sit drie ouens in 'n groepie. Hulle kon netsowel studente gewees het, maar daar's iets meer wêreldwys aan hulle. Waarskynlik akteurs. Heelwat aspirant-Broadway-sterre woon op Staten Island en pendel gereeld Manhattan toe vir oudisies. Noudat sy hulle opgemerk het, sien sy iets anders raak. Elke nou en dan glimlag een van hulle vir haar of doen iets om haar aandag te trek, en dan fluister hy vir sy vriende.

*Vreemd ....* Het sy iets gemors? Is haar ritssluiting oop? Sy kyk vinnig af na haar wit polonek en donker jeans. Nee, alles is waar dit moet wees. Net toe sy wil opkyk, raak sy bewus van iemand wat langs haar staan.

“Verskoon my.” Die ou kan nog nie een-en-twintig wees nie. Hy het 'n seunsagtige gesig met sproete en 'n borselkop – maar daar is iets hards aan sy oë. “Is jy op vakansie?”

“Ek?” Jamie kyk rond om seker te maak dat hy met haar praat. Dalk is dit die een of ander soort poets.

“Ja.” Hy kyk om na sy vriende. Hulle glimlag aansporend vir hom. “Ons is hier saam met ons geskiedenisklas.” Hy grinnik en twee kuiltjies verskyn in sy wange. “Ons, wel, ons het gewonder of jy 'n toeris is. Jy weet, op jou eie. Dalk is jy lus om saam met ons rond te loop.”

Jamie weerstaan die impuls om hardop te lag. Dit is glad nie 'n poets nie. Die kind is besig om by haar aan te lê! Haar gesig raak warm. “Is jy ernstig?”

“Sure.” Die ou kyk na die kleedkamers. “Is jy alleen hier?”

“Ja.” Jamie voel nie in die gesig gevat nie. Trouens, sy voel nogal gevelei.

Maar voordat sy nog iets kan sê, kom sit hy op die plek langs haar en sit sy arm om haar. “Moenie 'n geluid maak nie.”

Hy praat in 'n lae, sissende stem en Jamie se hart begin woes klop. Hoe kon sy so dom gewees het? Sy moes nooit gesê het dat sy alleen is nie. Sy moes dadelik opgestaan het toe hy met haar begin praat het.

“Ek's gewapen, maar ek wil jou nie seermaak nie, oukei?” Hy glimlag steeds, maar sy vingers is om haar skouer geklamp.

Sy gryns en probeer losruk, maar die ou se vriende het opgestaan en drentel nader. Een van hulle kom sit aan haar ander kant.

“Hoe lyk dit, baby?” Hierdie een het donker hare. Sy oë is bloedbelope en Jamie ril. *Here, help my ... hulle beplan iets.* Op sy trui staan OSU Football.

“Los my uit.” Sy sis die woorde vir die nuutste lid van die groep. “Gaan terug na julle sitplekke toe, of ek gil.”

“Probeer dit net, fees, en ek sit nou 'n koeël in jou hart.” Die sproetgesigkind lag, en die geluid gee Jamie hoendervleis. “Ons het vanoggend al twee mense

doodgemaak. Ons sal jou vrekmaak as jy nie doen wat ons sê nie.” Jamie vermoed dat hy nie die waarheid praat nie, maar dan voel sy iets hards teen haar ribbes.

“Ons speel nie, my skat.” Dis die derde ou, die een met die basketbalpet. “Jy’s ons s’n vir die dag, en ons gaan met jou maak wat ons wil. Verstaan jy?”

“Ja, en moenie ’n scene maak nie. Jy wil nie hê ons moet almal skiet nie.”

“Here ... ” Jamie maak haar oë toe en probeer om stil te wees. Dis nie moontlik nie. Haar gedagtes koers elkeen in ’n eie rigting. “Here, help my.”

Die borselkop lag hard. “Ja, sure, die Here gaan nou hier opdaag.”

Sy vriende val by hom in en Jamie kyk om haar rond. Kan niemand sien dat sy in die moeilikheid is nie? Of oortuig die ouens se gelag die ander passasiers dat sy deel is van die groep, ’n paar vriende wat ’n daguitstappie beplan?

“Wag tot jy sien wat ons vir jou beplan het, baby.” Die ou met die voetbaltrui praat smalend teen haar oor.

Sy asem ruik walglik na dagga en sy ruk haar kop weg. *Here ... help my om hier weg te kom.* Haar hart klop so vinnig dat sy kortasem raak. Die mees logiese uitweg is om te skree of te probeer wegkom. Maar wat van die pistool?

Dis een saak om haar eie lewe te waag. Wat maak dit saak as hulle haar skiet? Sy sal sekondes later in die hemel by Jesus wees en weer vir Jake sien. Maar sy kan nie net aan haarself dink nie.

Daar is Sierra.

En daarom kan sy nie gil of hardloop nie. Sy moet dink. Die enigste passasiers is die twee mans aan die oorkant van die boot. As hulle maar net na haar wou kyk, kan sy ’n boodskap met haar oë stuur. Haar gevangeners sal nie sien nie – twee van hulle praat slepend; noudat hulle Jamie in hulle kloue het, skenk hulle nie veel aandag aan haar nie.

*Kom tog, Here. Laat een van hulle na my kyk. Asseblief ...*

Op daardie oomblik staan die blonde man op en stap in hulle rigting. Hy kyk terug na sy vriend en wys na die kleedkamers. Dis haar kans. Hy moet reg langs haar verbyloop! As hy maar net na haar wil kyk. Hy is lank en lyk sterk genoeg om al drie booswigte manalleen aan te vat.

Jamie staar na hom en knip haar oë wild asof om hom te máák kyk.

“So wat gaan jy met haar doen as dit jou beurt is?” Die borselkop rammel ’n string kragwoorde af. Hy is so luidrugtig dat hy nie die blonde man in die paadjie links van hom sien aankom nie. “As ek met haar klaar is, gaan daar nie veel oor wees nie. Dalk moet ek eerder tot laaste wag.”

Skielik steek die blonde man vas, haal ’n pistool uit en rig dit op al vier van hulle. “Polisie, staan stil!”

Jamie kan haar oë nie glo nie. Dit moet ’n droom wees, maar dit is nie. ’n Sekonde later haal die swart man ook ’n pistool uit en draf nader.

“Hande in die lug!” Hy gluur hulle aan. “Wie van julle het die pistool?”

Al drie ouens se hande is dadelik in die lug. “Hei, man ... ” Die ou met die borselkop lag geforseerd. “Ons wou net ’n bietjie pret gehad het. Komaan, dis

niks ernstigs nie.”

“Bly stil.” Die blonde man hou sy pistool op die ou en kyk na Jamie. “Ken jy hierdie mans?”

“Néé!” Die woord is eerder ’n kreet as ’n antwoord. Jamie ruk los en vlug na die blonde polisiebeampte toe. Sy wys na die donkerkop. “Oppas! Hy het ’n wapen!”

“Ons het dit gesien.” Die man neem haar hand en stoot haar agter hom in. “Bly agter my; jy’s veilig.”

Terwyl die blonde man sy pistool op die jong mans gerig hou, beweeg die swart man in en gryp die ou met die pistool. “Gee my jou wapen. Nou!”

“Hei ... ” Hy gee ’n senuweeagtige laggie, sy hande steeds in die lug. “Dis soos Jason sê, ons wou net ’n bietjie pret – ”

“Gee die pistool vir my!” Die beampte se stem laat geen ruimte vir teëpraat nie.

Van waar Jamie agter die man staan, kan sy die toneel nie behoorlik sien afspeel nie. Is dit regtig besig om te gebeur? Het hierdie drie ouens regtig probeer om haar helder oordag te ontvoer? En wie is die polisiebeamptes? Engele?

Haar hart klop nog onstuimig, maar sy voel veilig agter die blonde man. Hy is heelwat groter as sy en hier agter hom weet sy dat sy veilig is. *Bedaar, Jamie ... bedaar. Die Here is by jou; dis oukei.* Sy sien Sierra voor haar en trane brand in haar oë. As die situasie anders verloop het ...

Jamie knyp haar oë toe totdat die nare gedagtes weg is. Sy maak hulle weer oop en kyk na die polisieman ’n paar treë van haar af. Die situasie is onder beheer; die seun gaan nou sy pistool oorhandig. Die Here het vir haar ’n wonderwerk gedoen, een wat steeds besig is om voor haar af te speel.

“Ek sê, gee die pistool vir my!” Die swart man is nou kwaad. Aan sy stem is dit duidelik dat hy genoeg gehad het van die speletjie.

“Whatever.” Dis die donkerkop. “Kyk, ek gaan nie hiervoor toegesluit word nie,” snou hy sy vriende toe. Dan laat sak hy een van sy hande na sy sak.

“Stadig!” blaf die blonde man. Jamie se hand is steeds in syne.

“Oukei, man, oukei.” Die seun haal die pistool uit sy baadjie en hou dit stadig na die polisieman toe uit. Sy hand bewe. “Vat dit net.”

“Hou jou mond!” Die blonde man blaf die bevel en draai na die ander. “Enige ander wapens voordat ons julle deursoek?”

’n Gedempte “Nee” kom van die trio. Al drie se hande is in die lug en niemand lag nie.

“Hou hulle in jou visier.” Die swart man kyk vinnig na sy vriend. Dan druk hy sy eie pistool weer in sy sak, swaai die donkerkop om en druk hom teen die veerboot se muur. Sy hande beweeg hardhandig langs die kind se lyf af. “Jy het die reg om stil te bly.” Dan voel hy of daar iets voor in die ou se baadjie is. “Enigiets wat jy sê of doen, kan en sal in die hof teen jou gebruik word ... ” Jamie se hande en knieë het begin bewe, waarskynlik van die adrenalinie. Wat is die kans dat die enigste ander twee mense op die onderste vlak van die



veerboot polisiemanne is? *Dankie, Here ... dankie.* Haar hartklop het egter nog nie bedaar nie.

Die blonde man praat met haar sonder om die ander twee onder sy oë uit te laat. “Het hulle jou gedreig?”

“Ja.” Jamie probeer sluk, maar haar keel is te droog. “Hulle ... hulle het gesê hulle gaan my skiet as ek gil. Hulle wou my verkrag.”

Die man draai na sy vriend. “Het jy dit gehoor?”

“Hard en duidelik.” Nadat hy die kind deursoek het, stamp hy hom op ’n sitplek neer. “Hou jou hande in die lug.”

Hy herhaal die proses met die ander twee, maar hulle is nie gewapen nie. Hy haal nietemin sy pistool uit en hou dit op hulle gerig. Met ’n grinnik kyk hy oor sy skouer vir sy vriend. “Gaan sê vir die kaptein ons het ’n paar vriende hier onder gemaak.”

Die blonde man lag. Haar hand is steeds in syne, en nou wys hy dat sy hom moet volg. Hulle is halfpad op met die trap toe hy na haar toe omkyk. “Ek’s sersant Clay ...”

Die res van sy woorde word deur die veerboot se mishoring ingesluk. “... van Los Angeles.”

“Clay Miles?” Die wind waai op die boonste dek en sy moet gil om gehoor te word.

“Ja.” Aan die bopunt van die trap draai hy na haar. “Wat is jou naam?” Dit is steeds moeilik om te hoor.

“Jamie Bryan.” Sy is nou veilig en die feit dat hy steeds haar hand vashou, voel ... eintlik kan Jamie nie uitmaak wat sy voel nie. Die man is lank, vanselfsprekend sterk en op ’n ruwe manier aantreklik. Dít, en hy het sopas haar lewe gered. “Ek weet nie wat om te sê nie.”

Sersant Miles los haar hand en wys na die kaptein se kantoor. “Kom ons gaan praat daarbinne.”

Sy knik en volg hom na die glaskantoor op die bodek. Hy verduidelik aan die kaptein dat hy ’n polisiebeampte van Los Angeles is en vertel wat gebeur het. Hulle is amper in die hawe, maar die kaptein roep radiobeheer en hoor dat die ouens gesoek word. Hulle het ’n winkeleienaar vroeër die oggend met ’n vuurwapen aangehou. Hulle het die polisie ontglim en laasgenoemde was op die punt om die kaptein te kontak – vir ingeval hulle aan boord was.

Die kaptein hou sy hand uit na sersant Miles. “Goeie werk.” Hy skud sy kop. “Het jy in New York kom vakansie hou?”

“Nee. Ons is hier vir speurderopleiding in Manhattan. NYPD.” Hy leun teen die glasruit en kyk na Jamie. “Ons het die verdagtes na hierdie dame sien loop, en my kollega het die pistool gesien.”

Jamie wil naderhardloop en hom omhels. In plaas daarvan wil sy haar knieë om op te hou bewe en hou aan die rugleuning van die kaptein se stoel vas. “Hulle ...” Sy kyk reguit in die polisieman se oë. “Jy het my lewe gered.”

Hy grinnik en haal sy een skouer op. “Ek skat die opleiding het vroeër begin as wat ons verwag het.”

Die kaptein is op die foon besig om te reël dat die veerboot deur 'n polisiebeampte by die dokke ingewag word. Hy sê hy sal almal aan boord hou totdat die eenheid gereed is.

“Nou ja, Jamie Bryan,” sersant Miles kyk uit oor die water, “hoekom is jy op 'n dag soos vandag op pad Manhattan toe?”

“Ek werk as 'n vrywilliger by St. Paul's.” Sy kyk weer in sy oë. Wat is dit aan hom? Sy het hom nog nooit voorheen gesien nie. Altans, sy dink nie so nie. Maar iets in sy oë laat haar voel asof sy hom nog altyd geken het.

Die man lig sy wenkbroue. “St. Paul's? Jy gaan my nie glo nie. Dis presies waarnatoe ons op pad is.”

“Rêrig?”

“Jip.” Hy hou sy kop skeef en kyk ondersoekend na haar. Sy oë is onpeilbaar teer, die volmaakte keersy van die ruwe ou wat sy 'n paar minute gelede gesien het. “Ons kursus begin eers later vanmiddag met oriëntasie.”

Jamie glimlag. “Ek dink joune het sopas afgeskop.”

“Dis waar.” Hy lag, veel meer ontspanne as onder by die drie ouens. Sy oë raak ernstig. “Die kapel, dis regoor waar die torings was, nè?”

“Ja.” Hulle gesels gemaklik en Jamie besef dat sy tot hom aangetrokke voel.

“Jy's nie dalk 'n engel nie?”

“Ek's bevrees nie.” Hy glimlag. “Net 'n doodgewone ou.”

Jamie sien niks doodgewoons aan hom nie. “Ek het vir uitkoms gebed en 'n oomblik later was jy daar met jou pistool.”

“Hmmm.” Hy kyk in haar oë. “Ek het gebed dat die Here my in New York sal gebruik soos Hy wil.”

Die kaptein is steeds oor die telefoon besig, maar hy het die veerboot weer in beweging gebring. Hulle is nou nie meer ver van die hawe nie en hulle word reeds deur drie polisiemotors met flitsende ligte ingewag. Sy ril; hoe anders sou vandag nie afgeloop het as die twee polisiebeamptes nie daar was nie?

“Dus glo jy in gebed, sersant ...”

“Noem my Clay.” Hy druk sy hande in sy jeans se sakke. Sy leerbaadjie steek skerp af teen sy ligte langbroek. “En ja. Om jou die waarheid te sê, die Here is amper alles vir my.”

Haar stem val 'n aks. “Vir my ook.”

“Is dit waarom jy by St. Paul's uithelp?”

“Soort van.” Dit voel nie reg om oor Jake te praat nie. Sy gaan die man ná vandag waarskynlik nooit weer sien nie. Hoekom sal sy hom met haar persoonlike hartseer opsaal? “Wat van jou?”

“My kollega het 'n paar goed wat hy moet hanteer. Dis 'n lang storie.”

'n Sagte stampie dui daarop dat hulle die dok bereik het. Die kaptein doen 'n afkondiging oor die radio: “Ons versoek alle passasiers om te bly sit; ek herhaal: Alle passasiers, bly asseblief sit. Ons het 'n insident aan boord gehad en die polisie gaan 'n paar minute nodig hê om die situasie te hanteer. Ek vra weer, bly asseblief sit.”

Gedurende die afkondiging verbeel Jamie haar dat Clay vinnig na haar

linkerhand kyk. Maar dit gebeur so vinnig dat sy nie seker is nie. Ná die drama – en die onverklaarbare band wat sy met ’n vreemdeling ervaar – is sy doodseker dat haar verbeelding op hol is.

Nadat die kaptein weer vir Clay dankie gesê het, groet hy hulle. “Ek moet onder wees as hulle die verdagtes in hegtenis neem.”

“Reg so, Kaptein. Ek’s bly ons kon help.”

Die kaptein loop en hulle is alleen.

“Moet jy nie ook daar wees nie?” Sy kyk weer na die polisiebeamptes wat haastig uit hulle motors klim en na die veerboot se loopplank beweeg.

“Nee. Dis nie ons jurisdiksie nie. Ons kan ’n misdaad onderskep, maar daarna is dit die plaaslike ouens se verantwoordelikheid.”

“Ek sien.” Jamie behoort Clay te bedank omdat hy haar lewe gered het en oor gemeenplase te begin gesels. Maar die gevoel dat sy hom ken – goed ken – wil nie weggaan nie. Sy kyk na haar hande. “Hulle bewe nog.”

Hy kom nader en met die gemaklikheid van twee ou vriende trek hy haar teen hom vas. “Ek wou niks sê nie.” Hy staan terug en glimlag vir haar. “Jy was aanvanklik bloedrooi, maar nou ... jy’s so wit soos ’n laken.”

“Is ek?” Sy weet nie hoekom nie, maar sy wil so lank moontlik aan die oomblik vashou. “Nog steeds?”

“Mhmm.” Hy plaas sy hande op haar skouers. “Asem ’n paar keer uit, lank en stadig. Dit behoort te help.”

Sy doen wat hy sê terwyl hy na haar kyk. “Voel jy lighoofdig?”

“Dalk is dit wat dit is. Ek kan nie eintlik beskryf hoe ek voel nie.”

Hy staan steeds met sy hande op haar skouers en kyk ondersoekend na haar. “Jy lyk nou ’n bietjie beter.” Sy stem is nou dié van ’n beleefde geregsdienaar in ’n tyd van nood.

Maar daar is iets meer in sy oë. Jamie is nie seker of sy haar natuurlike gelaatskleur ooit weer onder sy blou oë gaan terugkry nie.

’n Volgende afkondiging weerklink oor die luidsprekers. “Dankie vir u geduld. Dis nou veilig om aan wal te gaan.”

Clay laat haar gaan en knik na die deur. “Kan twee Los Angeles-polisiemanne jou na St. Paul’s vergesel?”

Jamie glimlag. “Asseblief.”

Clay grinnik. “Nou ja, dit word laat. Kom ons gaan.”

Hulle kry Clay se kollega, speurder Joe Reynolds, op die eerste vloer en neem ’n taxi na St. Paul’s. Hulle is halfpad daar toe Jamie uiteindelik besef wat sy gevoel het, wat die vreemde sensasie was toe Clay haar agter sy rug ingetrek en teen die verdagtes beskerm het, en toe hy haar later vasgehou het. Dit was nie vrees of skok of lighoofdigheid nie.

Dit was iets soos elektrisiteit.

# Chapter TWELVE

She was gorgeous, no doubt about that.

Clay wouldn't have noticed she was in trouble if it wasn't for the fact that from the moment he boarded the ferry, he hadn't been able to take his eyes off her. Reynolds had even teased him about it. "Take a picture, pal. She'll think you're a tourist."

Things happened so fast since then. He'd managed to come off as a professional, but taking her in his arms was totally out of character for him. Out of line, really. He could justify it because she looked faint, but he'd seen far worse cases. More than her health, he was concerned about her feelings. She looked scared and shocked and vulnerable; he simply wanted to hold her.

But who was she? And where was she going alone? He was almost certain she was married, why wouldn't she be?

He'd tried to get a look at her left hand, to see if she wore a ring, but he hadn't gotten a clear view.

Now they were in the cab, with Clay in the middle. Reynolds raised an eyebrow at him, but Clay silenced him with a look. This was no time for the flight attendant act he'd pulled earlier. Reynolds seemed to get the point. He gave Clay a halfhearted scowl and made light conversation about the buildings in the area and plans for rebuilding the Twin Towers.

With Jamie talking to Reynolds, Clay tried again to steal a look at her ring finger. This time she had her hands beneath her, probably trying to keep them warm. Clay looked straight ahead out the windshield of the cab. Was he losing his mind? What did it matter if she had a ring or not? He'd known the woman less than an hour.

Reynolds waxed on; the man was brilliant at carrying on empty conversations. Clay didn't pay much attention. Crazy or not, his focus was on the woman beside him. From time to time, he glanced at her and found her looking at him. And he got the sense she'd felt a connection with him,

same way he had with her.

The cab pulled up in front of the chapel, and Clay paid the driver. The three of them climbed out, and Reynolds nodded toward the gaping hole, the place where the towers had stood.

“So that’s the place.”

“Yes.” Jamie looked up and squinted, as if picturing the buildings the way they had been. “No matter how many times I look up, it’s still hard to believe they’re gone.”

Reynolds stuffed his hands in his pockets and looked at the others. “Wanna walk over?”

Clay looked at Jamie. “You probably have to get inside, right?”

“It’s okay, I’ll come with you.” She glanced back at the chapel. “There’ll be other volunteers on by now.”

The three of them crossed the street and moved as close to the chain-link fence as possible. Maybe thirty or forty people stood along the length of the fence, some in small clusters, some alone.

“Most people expect to see flowers or notes stuck in the fence.” Jamie kept her voice low, respectful. She stood between the two men and folded her arms. “The city cleans it up every night; some of the stuff gets tossed—flowers, mostly. Teddy bears get donated to the children’s hospital, and photos, letters—” she sighed—“they come to us.”

“At St. Paul’s?” Clay figured he was nearly a foot taller than her. He turned to hear her better.

“Yes.” She met his eyes, and again the connection was there, a familiar current, a sense that he knew what she was going to say before she said it. “Wait till you see it.”

Reynolds headed up the sidewalk, eyes on the cavernous hole. Clay and Jamie followed, silent. Along the fence, city personnel had posted oversized mounted photos of the history of the Twin Towers. Together the three of them worked their way west, reading the captions, taking in the enormity of both the force it had taken to bring those buildings down and

the rebuilding project.

They reached the last photo, and something caught Clay's attention. It was a subway entrance, the stair rail and steps that led down to what at one time must've been one of the busiest subway stations of all. He leaned against the railing and looked down. From the eighth or ninth stair down, the entrance was still filled with debris—jagged cement blocks and twisted steel.

Jamie came up beside him and looked down. Instantly she stiffened and backed away.

"Jamie?"

Her face was pale again. She shook her head. "I...I hadn't seen that before."

"It's still full of debris." Clay fell in step beside her, and they moved beyond the stairwell.

"Yes. They should clean it because..."

She didn't have to finish her sentence; Clay could see where she was headed with it. The bodies of countless people had never been found. Wasn't it possible a body was trapped in that tunnel?

Of course it was.

She pulled herself away and fell in beside Clay again. Their steps were slow, waiting for Reynolds to catch up. Clay allowed his arm to brush against Jamie's as they walked.

"Are you okay?"

"Yes." Jamie shuddered. She stopped and turned, her back to the chapel. "It was three years ago, after all." She looked up at the bleak gray sky and crossed her arms tight against her chest. "It's freezing out here."

He wanted to put his arm around her and keep her warm; to shelter her from not only the cold weather but whatever had caused her to react so strongly to the damaged subway entrance. Instead he took off his coat and handed it to her. "I'm too warm. Why don't you wear it?"

Though Jamie's teeth chattered, she hesitated—then let him slip it

over her shoulders. She reached up to tug it in place.

That's when Clay saw the ring.

On her left hand. No question it was a wedding band. Clay's heart dropped to his knees. So that was that. She was married, probably a bored housewife volunteering at St. Paul's to find purpose in her life—maybe as part of a calling from God.

Either way, she was taken.

Clay jammed his emotional gears. He'd saved her life. She was bound to be friendly, welcoming. Whatever he'd imagined seeing in her eyes was only wishful thinking on his part. He made a subtle move to the side, allowing a gap between them. "You didn't leave your coat on the ferry, did you?"

"No." She gave a slight roll of her eyes. "I'm so scatterbrained. I left it at the chapel last week. Coldest day of the season so far, and I don't have a coat." She wrinkled her nose. "I thought a turtleneck would keep me warm until I got inside."

"Yeah." Clay made a face and grinned. "Then you had to go and meet a couple of tourists, right?"

His jacket was huge on her. She slid her arms in the sleeves and buried her hands in the pockets. Her eyes met his and held. It was as though she looked far beyond the surface, deep into his soul. "You saved my life, Clay. After what you did, I can brave a little cold weather to show you around."

Reynolds met up with them, and they crossed the street again. They were silent as they headed up the sidewalk, along the fenced-in cemetery, and around the corner into the chapel. Jamie turned to the left, toward a display of memorabilia. She hesitated, then turned back to them.

Without moving, Clay let his eyes wander the inside perimeter of the chapel. There must've been thousands of photos and letters and pictures, buttons from firefighter uniforms and badges with NYPD embroidered on them. It was too much to take in without doing what the few other people

in the chapel were doing: making their way, with slow steps, around the wall to the other side.

Jamie spread out her hand and gave them a sad smile. "This is St. Paul's."

There was a reverence to the place, a sense that merely by walking through the doors a person was on hallowed ground. No wonder. Clay looked around again, this time noticing the banners that lined the walls, banners from other cities and states offering hope and love and prayers for the people in Manhattan. Between the walls of mementos and the old wooden pews in the center, the place was truly a memorial.

He looked at Jamie. "I can feel God's Spirit here."

"Yes." She smiled. "It's that way every day."

Reynolds was already absorbed in the details, reading notes and inching his way along the displays that lined the first wall. Praying would come later. For now, Clay had a thought: What if Reynolds's wife had been to St. Paul's? Reynolds hadn't been sure where to find her or if she still lived in the area. At breakfast that morning, Reynolds told Clay that Wanda's mother died in 2000, which left him no way to find his wife but to come to New York and look for her.

Did St. Paul's keep a record of visitors? If so, maybe they could figure out if she'd been there, get a name and a city. It was worth asking.

Jamie removed Clay's jacket, gave it back to him, and took a name badge from her purse. She pinned it to her sweater and smiled at him. "Thanks." Her eyes held his. "Are you going to walk around?"

"Well..." Clay chewed on his lip. "Could we talk first?" He shot a look at Reynolds. "My friend is looking for someone very special to him. She might've come here."

Jamie was about to answer when an older woman with a volunteer pin like Jamie's came up to them. "Jamie, thanks for coming. The weather's awful."

"No problem." She met Clay's eyes. "I wasn't sure I was going to



make it in.”

“We’re slow.” She held up a finger. “That reminds me. Captain Hisel said to tell you he couldn’t come today. He’s got a meeting at the department.”

“Okay.” She touched the woman’s hand. “Thanks.”

The older woman nodded and wandered off, heading for a middle-aged woman in the back pew. It looked like the woman was crying. Clay and Jamie watched the older volunteer make contact, speak quiet words for a moment, and then sit down. Their conversation looked deep from the get-go.

“So this is what you do?” Clay’s voice was barely a whisper. He leaned in toward Jamie, but only so she could hear him. “Talk with people who come here?”

“Exactly. Talk, pray, counsel. Listen.” The tenderness in her eyes caught at him. “We do a lot of listening.” She turned toward a pew in the middle of the chapel and motioned with her head for him to follow.

They sat down, but not too close. Clay made sure their knees didn’t touch. Even so, the subtle fragrance of her perfume stirred his senses.

“What’s your friend’s story?” No pretense, no guarded layers to work through. Jamie simply opened her heart to whatever Clay might have to say, ready to help—just as she must’ve done countless times here.

“I just found out myself yesterday, on our flight here.” Clay looked toward the front of the church. *She’s another man’s wife.* But the reminder didn’t help as much as he’d hoped.

Clay told the story Reynolds had shared with him the day before. When he got to the part about Jimmy getting hit by the paroled felon, Jamie’s quiet gasp drew his gaze to her.

“That’s awful.”

“Yes.” He wanted to pull her close, hug away the pain in her eyes, the hurt that surrounded them. A young couple entered the chapel and began moving along the wall, a few yards behind Reynolds. “It gets worse.”

Clay shared how Reynolds and his wife tried to make their marriage work, but neither of them could see past their grief. “They were strong believers, but they were blinded by what happened. They divorced a few months later.”

Jamie brought her lips together and looked at her lap. She gave a small shake of her head. When she looked up, her eyes were damp. “He hasn’t seen her since?”

“Actually, his wife married an FDNY officer stationed somewhere in Manhattan. They lived in Queens, and he commuted in. Like a lot of firefighters, I guess.”

She squirmed. “Was her husband killed in the attacks?” A flicker ignited in her eyes.

“Yes. Joe meant to call and see how she was, how she was handling her husband’s death, but he couldn’t do it; wasn’t sure how she’d react after so many years.” Clay crossed one leg over the other and braced his arm along the back of the pew. “He heard about the training course out here.” Clay spotted Reynolds nearing the end of the first wall. “I think he wants to find her.”

Jamie knit her brow together and leaned forward, resting on the pew in front of her. “Something about the story sounds familiar. What was his wife’s name?”

“Wanda.” Clay thought for a minute. “I can’t remember her last name.”

“I know a Wanda, at least I’ve met her. We prayed together here a few months ago. If I remember right, she said something about losing a little boy ten years ago.” Jamie sat a little straighter. “What did she look like?”

“Not sure what she looks like now.” Reynolds was partway along the back of the wall, still looking at the items collected in the past three years. “Joe has a picture of her on his desk, the last picture taken with her and Jimmy. She was beautiful, a black woman with brown skin and

straightened hair. Big, childlike eyes.”

Jamie’s eyes widened. “That’s got to be her.” Sadness replaced her excitement. “She’s...a very troubled woman, Clay. Too many losses.”

“Wait—” disbelief worked its way through him—“so you *know* her? You’ve prayed with her?” He hadn’t been in New York twentyfour hours and already amazing things were happening. He didn’t wait for Jamie’s answer. “Do you have any idea how we could find her?” A realization hit him. “Or if she’d want to be found?”

Jamie put her hand on her forehead. “This is so weird.”

“What?”

“I just remembered something we prayed for, Wanda and I.” Jamie looked straight at him. “We prayed she might find her first husband. So she could make peace with him.”

A chill ran down Clay’s spine. He wanted to fall to his knees and look around, in case angels were hovering overhead. “Do you know how to reach her?”

“I think so.” She stood, motioning for him to follow her.

They went to the opposite side of the chapel, to a set of stairs that led to a break room. Off to one side was a small office, and inside that, a file cabinet. Clay waited in the doorway while Jamie searched, and after only a few seconds, she pulled out a single sheet of paper. “Here it is!”

“What?” Clay took a step closer and squinted at the paper.

“Wanda thought she might want to volunteer here. She filled out an application, but decided it was too soon. We kept the information on file, in case she changed her mind.” Jamie scanned the sheet. “It has everything. Her name’s Wanda Johnston, and she lives in Queens. Her phone, her cell phone, it’s all here.”

Clay couldn’t speak. The day was already so full of miracles, he couldn’t find the words to sum it up. Finally he managed a question. “What should we do?”

Jamie shrugged. “I’ll call and ask her. I can’t give the information out

unless she agrees.”

“Okay.” Clay nodded. *God...be with Wanda, let her want this meeting. For Joe’s sake.*

The phone on the desk was an older model, with a short cord. Jamie sat down, picked up the receiver and began to dial. After a minute she hung up and looked at the application again. “I’ll try her cell.”

*Please, God...* An answer this soon would ignite Reynolds’s faith and bring him the healing he needed.

Jamie dialed again and waited. Her eyes lit up after a few seconds. “Wanda? Hi, this is Jamie Bryan over at St. Paul’s. How are you?” Silence. “Well, you won’t believe this. Remember how we prayed when you were here, that you would find your first husband so you could make peace with him?” She grinned at Clay, her eyes dancing. “Well, he and a friend just walked into the chapel this morning.” Pause. “No, I’m serious. Joe wants your phone number; I told his friend I’d call you to see if it was okay to give it out. Sure. We’ll work it out.” Jamie hesitated, then laughed out loud. “I know. We serve a mighty God.” She gave Clay a pointed look. “That seems to be the message of the day.”

The conversation ended, and Jamie held the application in the air. “Yes!” She scribbled some numbers on a piece of paper and ripped it from the pad. “She wants to see him!”

It was the second time in as many hours that Clay wanted to hug her, but he resisted. They walked back downstairs, Clay reminding himself with every step to keep calm. The mood in the chapel was as hushed and somber as before. Reynolds was at the right side of the back wall, still lost in the items on display.

Clay led the way. When he reached his friend, he tapped him on the shoulder.

“Huh?” Joe turned around. His eyes were watery. “Oh, sorry.” He looked at his watch. “Guess I got a little carried away. Like you always say, it’s late and getting later.”

"I'm not worried about the time." The sense of awe still had a grip on Clay. He gave a single shake of his head. "C'mere, buddy. You won't believe this." He took Joe's arm and led him back to the center pew. Jamie followed along, and she and Clay sat with Joe in the middle.

"Joe, listen." Clay gave Jamie a quick look and couldn't keep from grinning. "I told Jamie your story." He hesitated, studying his friend. "She knows Wanda; she had a volunteer application on file."

"What?" Joe's mouth hung open as he looked at Jamie. His chin quivered and he swallowed hard. "You *what*?"

"I know her, Joe. I called her a few minutes ago." Jamie smiled. "She wants to see you." She handed him the piece of paper with Wanda's numbers on it. "I told her you'd be calling."

Joe took the piece of paper and stared at it, as if it might disappear if he looked away. He clenched his jaw, stood, and looked first at Jamie, then at Clay. "If you'll excuse me." His voice was raspy, filled with a decade of fear, regret, and grief—but layered with a joy that rang out. He smiled despite the wetness in his eyes. "I have a phone call to make."

They watched him go, and Jamie looked to the front of the chapel, at the towering white cross. She took in a long, slow breath and turned to Clay. "What a day, huh?"

He leaned back against the hard wood. It was his turn to walk the perimeter, to look at the remembrances and pay homage to the people who had lost their lives in the attacks. But he couldn't pull away, couldn't cut the conversation with this woman short. So she was married. No harm in talking to her, especially after what they'd been through that morning.

"What's your story, Clay?" She had an easy way about her, gentle words and eyes that hit him at his deepest level. "Married? Kids?"

The question wasn't suggestive, just curious. Clay rested his elbow on the back of the pew. "Never married. I've got a brother not far from me in California, so I spend time with his family." He gave a light-hearted laugh. "Lots of girlfriends, but never the right one."

“Hmmm.” She smiled, teasing. “A California playboy, huh?”

“Hardly.” Clay chuckled. “Work keeps me busy; I don’t get out much. When the time’s right, I want to get married, have a family. I guess God’ll let me know.” He crossed his arms. “What about you? What’s your husband do?”

The humor faded from her eyes. A stricken look froze her features, and she looked at her hands for a long while.

Clay studied her, wanting to help. What had he said? Was her marriage in trouble? He hadn’t meant to hit a nerve. “Jamie? I’m sorry.”

She looked up. “It’s okay.”

“It’s just that—” he looked at her left hand—“you’re wearing a ring, and I thought...”

“Don’t be sorry. I haven’t taken it off.” Her eyes were dry, but somewhere inside it was clear that she was weeping. “Jake was a firefighter. He...he died in the attacks.”

Of course. Clay hung his head against his forearm and exhaled hard. Why hadn’t he figured that out? She was alone on the ferry, trekking in from Staten Island to volunteer at what was basically a memorial site for the Twin Towers. He pulled his head up slowly and looked at her. “I’m sorry, Jamie.”

“The department lost more than four hundred men that day. Dozens more from the NYPD.” She sniffed and a smile tried to break through the clouds in her eyes. “I’m hardly alone in my loss.”

It was a line she must’ve repeated over and over a hundred times a month, but Clay was struck with how hard it was for her to say it, even after three years. He wanted to know more, but the timing didn’t feel right. “Do you have children?”

“A daughter. Sierra.” At the mention of the girl, Jamie’s eyes came back to life. She sniffed. “The two of us are very close. She’s seven now, in second grade.”

Reynolds came through the front door, a grin on his face that warmed

the whole chapel. As he got closer, he held his cell phone up in the air and beamed at them. “I’m meeting her for lunch.”

“Really?” Clay sat straighter. “You ready for that?” The reunion was bound to be emotional, especially if Joe told her all the things he planned to say.

A sober look flashed in his face. “I was ready years ago.” He sat down next to Clay. “Talk to the Big Man for me, will you? It’s been awhile.” He checked his watch again. “It’s noon. I told her I’d take a cab to the restaurant.” He looked at Clay. “I’ll meet you at orientation.”

“Oh, sure.” Clay grinned at him. “Ditch me in downtown Manhattan our first day.”

“I’m off at 12:30.” Jamie looked at Clay. “I’ll buy lunch.” Jamie stood and ran her fingers through her dark hair.

“You don’t have to do that.” Clay’s heart still ached for her. They hadn’t gotten to finish their conversation. “I can find something to do.”

“Clay—“ The sorrow faded a little more from her eyes. “You rescued me. I think I can cough up lunch.”

Before Clay could reply, Joe chuckled. “Yeah, that’s right. Try to look upset that I’m ditching you, man.” Joe winked at him and raised an eyebrow at Jamie. “I think the two of y’all will be just fine without me.”

## **Twaalf**

Sy is beeldskoon, dis ’n feit.

Clay sou nie opgemerk het dat sy in die moeilikheid was as dit nie vir die feit was dat hy nie sy oë van haar kon wegskeur sedert hy aan boord gegaan het nie. Reynolds het hom selfs daaroor geterg. “Neem ’n foto, pel. Sy sal dink jy’s ’n toeris.”

Daarna het alles baie vinnig gebeur. Hy het daarin geslaag om ’n professionele beeld te handhaaf, maar dit was totaal strydig met sy aard om haar in sy arms te neem. Eintlik strydig met beleid. Hy kan dit probeer regverdig omdat dit gelyk het of sy gaan flou word, maar hy het al baie erger gevalle gesien. Dit was nie soseer haar gesondheid waaroor hy besorg was nie, maar haar gevoelens. Sy het bang en geskok en kwesbaar gelyk; hy moes

haar eenvoudig vashou.

Maar wie is sy? En waarheen is sy alleen op pad? Hy is amper seker sy is getroud; hoekom sou sy nie wees nie?

Hy het probeer om na haar linkerhand te kyk om te sien of sy 'n ring dra, maar hy kon nie mooi sien nie.

Nou sit hulle in die taxi met Clay in die middel. Reynolds lig 'n wenkbrou vir hom, maar Clay se kyk maak hom stil. Dis nie nou die tyd vir die lugwaardinstreek wat hy op die vlug uitgehaal het nie. Dit lyk of Reynolds snap. Hy frons gemaak vir hom en gesels oppervlakkig oor die geboue in die area en planne vir die herbou van die Twin Towers.

Terwyl Jamie met Reynolds gesels, probeer Clay weer 'n glimp van haar ringvinger kry. Hierdie keer sit sy op haar hande, waarskynlik om hulle warm te hou. Clay kyk vorentoe deur die taxi se voorruit. Is hy besig om sy kop te verloor? Wat maak dit saak of sy 'n ring het of nie? Hy ken die vrou nog nie eens 'n uur lank nie.

Reynolds borduur voort; die man is briljant as dit by oppervlakkige geselsies kom. Clay luister net met 'n halwe oor. Sy aandag is by die vrou hier langs hom. Af en toe kyk hy na haar en betrap haar oë op hom. Hy kry die gevoel dat sy 'n band met hom voel, nes hy met haar.

Die huurmotor hou voor die kapel stil en Clay betaal die bestuurder. Hulle klim uit en Reynolds knik na die kaal plek waar die torings gestaan het.

“Dis die plek, nè?”

“Ja.” Jamie kyk op en skreef haar oë, amper asof sy die geboue voor haar sien soos hulle eens gestaan het. “Maak nie saak hoeveel keer ek opkyk nie, dis steeds moeilik om te glo dat hulle weg is.”

Reynolds druk sy hande in sy sakke en kyk na die ander twee. “Wil julle gaan kyk?”

Clay kyk na Jamie. “Jy moet seker ingaan, nè?”

“Dis oukei. Ek loop saam met julle.” Sy kyk terug na die kapel. “Daar sal nou al ander vrywilligers wees.”

Nadat hulle die straat oorgesteek het, loop hulle na die ysterheining toe. Dertig, veertig mense staan al langs die heining, sommige in klein groepies, sommige alleen.

“Die meeste mense dink dat daar blomme of briefies hier sal wees.” Jamie praat in 'n sagte, eerbiedige stem. Sy staan tussen die twee mans en vou haar arms. “Die munisipaliteit kom elke aand hier opruim. Sommige van die goed word weggegooi – die blomme, hoofsaaklik. Teddiebere word aan die kinders hospitaal geskenk, en die foto's, briewe ... ” sy sug, “hulle kom na ons toe.”

“St. Paul's?” Clay raai hy is meer as 'n kop langer as sy. Hy draai na haar om beter te hoor.

“Ja.” Hulle oë ontmoet, en weer is hy bewus van die band, 'n bekende stroom, die gevoel dat hy gaan weet wat sy sê voordat sy dit sê. “Wag tot jy dit sien.” Reynolds loop verder teen die heining af, sy oë op die gapende gat. Clay en



Jamie volg swyend. Die munisipaliteit het groot foto's van die Twin Towers se geskiedenis laat aanbring. Terwyl hulle tydsaam verby die foto's beweeg en die byskrifte lees, kom hulle opnuut onder die indruk van die omvang van die krag wat die geboue vernietig het, sowel as die omvang van die beplande bouprojek.

Toe hulle die laaste foto bereik, word Clay se aandag deur iets getrek. Nie ver van waar hulle staan nie, is daar 'n ingang na een van die ondergrondse treine, die trap wat waarskynlik na een van die besigste moltreinstasies gelei het. Hy leun oor die reling en kyk af. Vanaf die agtste of negende trap ondertoe is die ingang steeds vol puin – brokstukke sement en verwronge staal.

Jamie kom staan langs hom en kyk af. Dan verstyf sy en retireer 'n paar treë.

“Jamie?”

Sy het weer verbleek, en sy skud haar kop. “Ek ... dis die eerste keer dat ek dit sien.”

“Dis nog steeds vol puin.” Clay val langs haar in en hulle loop verby die trapkuil.

“Ja. Hulle behoort dit op te ruim, want ...”

Sy hoef nie haar sin te voltooi nie; Clay weet waarheen sy op pad is daarmee. Die liggame van ontelbare mense is nooit opgespoor nie. Dis seker moontlik dat daar nog liggame in die tunnel vasgekeer is.

Sy skeur haarself weg en val weer langs Clay in. Hulle loop stadig sodat Reynolds hulle kan inhaal. Clay laat toe dat sy arm aan Jamie s'n raak terwyl hulle loop.

“Is jy oukei?”

“Ja.” Jamie ril. Sy steek vas en draai om sodat sy met haar rug na die kapel staan. “Dis immers al drie jaar gelede.” Sy kyk op in die grys lug en vou haar arms styf oor haar bors. “Dis vriesend koud hier buite.”

Hy wil sy arm om haar sit en haar warm hou; wil haar beskerm – nie net teen die koue nie, maar ook teen dit wat haar hewige reaksie op die ondergrondse ingang veroorsaak het. In plaas daarvan trek hy sy jas uit en gee dit vir haar. “Ek kry te warm. Trek jy dit aan.”

Alhoewel Jamie se tande klapper, aarsel sy vir 'n oomblik. Dan laat sy toe dat hy dit oor haar skouers hang. Sy trek dit om haar vas. Dis toe dat Clay die ring sien.

Aan haar linkerhand. Daar bestaan geen twyfel dat dit 'n trouering is nie. Clay se moed sak in sy skoene. Daar het hy dit. Sy is getroud, waarskynlik 'n verveelde huisvrouw wat by St. Paul's uithelp om sin aan haar lewe te gee – dalk as deel van 'n roeping van God.

Hoe dit ook al sy, sy het 'n man.

Clay bring sy emosies onder beheer. Hy het haar lewe gered. Dis net vanselfsprekend dat sy vriendelik en innemend teenoor hom sal wees. Wat hy ook al in haar oë gelees het, was bloot sy eie wensdenkery. Hy beweeg subtiel weg van haar. “Jy het nie jou jas op die veerboot vergeet nie, of hoe?”

“Nee.” Sy rol haar oë. “Ek's so verstrooid. Ek het dit verlede week in die

kapel vergeet. Dis sover die koudste dag van die seisoen, en ek het nie 'n jas nie." Sy kreukel haar neus. "Ek het gedink 'n polonek sal my warm hou tot ek binne is."

"Ja." Clay trek 'n gesig en grinnik. "En toe word jy deur 'n paar toeriste onderskep."

Jamie verdrink in sy baadjie. Sy steek haar arms in die moue en druk haar hande in die sakke. Sy lig haar oë en kyk vir 'n paar sekondes in syne. Dis asof sy tot diep in sy hart kan sien. "Jy het my lewe gered, Clay. Ná wat jy gedoen het, kan ek 'n bietjie koue trotseer om jou rond te wys."

Reynolds sluit by hulle aan en hulle loop weer oor die straat. Hulle stap in stilte tot by die kapel. Binnekant draai Jamie links, na 'n tafel vol gedenkwaardighede. Sy aarsel en draai dan na hulle toe.

Clay se oë beweeg teen die mure van die kapel af. Daar is seker duisende foto's en briewe, brandweeruniform-knope en kentekens met die NYPD-embleem daarop geborduur. Dis onmoontlik om alles in te neem sonder om nes die ander besoekers stadig langs die binnemure af te beweeg.

Jamie lig haar hand en glimlag hartseer. "Dit is St. Paul's."

Daar is iets ontsagwekkends aan die plek, 'n gevoel dat 'n mens heilige grond betree wanneer jy hier inkom. Dis ook geen wonder nie. Clay kyk weer om hom rond en hierdie keer val sy oë op die baniere teen die mure waarop ander stede en state hulle hoop en liefde en gebede aan die mense van Manhattan oordra. Met die mure vol aandenkings en die ou houtbanke in die middel is die plek werklik 'n plek van herdenking.

Hy kyk na Jamie. "Ek kan God se Gees hier voel."

"Ja." Sy glimlag. "Dis elke dag so."

Reynolds is alreeds besig om langs die eerste muur af te beweeg, meegevoer deur die briefies en uitstallings op die tafels. Hulle sal later bid. Voorlopig het Clay 'n idee: Sê nou Reynolds se vrou was al hier in St. Paul's? Reynolds is nie seker waar om na haar te soek en of sy steeds in die area woon nie. Vanoggend met ontbyt het Reynolds vir hom gesê dat Wanda se ma in 2000 oorlede is. Hy het dus geen ander keuse gehad as om New York toe te kom en self na haar te kom soek nie.

Hou St. Paul's 'n rekord van besoekers? Indien wel, kan hulle dalk uitvind of sy hier was, 'n naam en 'n stad kry. Dit kan nie kwaad doen om te vra nie.

Jamie trek Clay se jas uit, gee dit vir hom en haal 'n naambalkie uit haar handsak. Sy speld dit aan haar polonek vas en glimlag vir hom. "Dankie." Sy kyk 'n oomblik lank in sy oë. "Wil jy 'n bietjie rondkyk?"

"Wel ... " Clay kou sy lip. "Kan ons eers gesels?" Hy kyk in Reynolds se rigting. "My vriend is op soek na iemand wat baie spesiaal vir hom is. Sy sou dalk hiernatoe gekom het."

Jamie is op die punt om te antwoord toe 'n ouer vrou met 'n balkie nes dié van Jamie na hulle toe kom. "Jamie, dankie dat jy gekom het. Dis só 'n goor dag."

"Dis glad nie 'n probleem nie." Sy ontmoet Clay se oë. "Ek was nie seker of

ek dit sou maak nie.”

“Ons is stil.” Sy hou ’n vinger op. “Dit herinner my. Kaptein Hisel het laat weet ek moet vir jou sê dat hy nie vandag inkom nie. Hy het ’n vergadering by die stasie.”

“Oukei.” Sy raak aan die vrou se hand. “Dankie.”

Die ouer vrou knik en loop in die rigting van ’n middeljarige vrou in die agterste ry. Dit lyk of die vrou huil. Clay en Jamie kyk die ouer vrywilliger agterna. Nadat sy ’n paar oomblikke sag met die vrou gepraat het, gaan sy langs haar sit. Dit lyk asof hulle gesprek van meet af diep is.

“Is dit wat jy doen?” Clay se woorde is skaars ’n fluistering. Hy leun oor na Jamie, maar net sodat sy hom kan hoor. “Gesels jy met die mense wat hiernatoe kom?”

“Ja. Gesels, bid, beraad. Luister.” Die teerheid in haar oë pluk aan hom. “Ons luister baie.” Sy draai na ’n bank in die middel van die kapel en wys met haar kop dat hy moet volg.

Hulle gaan sit langs mekaar, maar Clay sorg dat hulle knieë nie aan mekaar raak nie. Hy kan egter nie anders as om van haar subtiële parfuum bewus te wees nie.

“Wat is jou vriend se verhaal?” Jamie se oë is sonder pretensie, sonder enige behoedsame sluiers. Die vrou voor hom het bloot haar hart oopgemaak vir wat Clay ook al gaan sê, bereid om te help – nes sy waarskynlik al honderde kere hier gedoen het.

“Ek het eers gister in die vliegtuig op pad hierheen uitgevind.” Clay kyk na die voorkant van die kerk. *Sy is ’n ander man se vrou.* Maar sy aanmaning is nie so effektief soos hy gehoop het nie.

Clay vertel die verhaal wat Reynolds die vorige dag met hom gedeel het. Toe hy by die gedeelte kom waar Jimmy deur die paroolganger raakgery is, laat Jamie se sagte snak hom na haar kyk.

“Dis verskriklik.”

“Ja.” Hy wil haar nadertrek, haar vashou totdat die pyn in haar oë en die pyn oral rondom hulle weggaan. ’n Jong paartjie kom by die kapel in en begin langs die muur afbeweeg. “Dis nog nie al nie.”

Clay vertel dat Reynolds en sy vrou hulle huwelik probeer laat werk het, maar nie een van hulle kon verby hulle verlies kyk nie. “Hulle was sterk gelowiges, maar hulle was verblind deur wat gebeur het. Hulle is ’n paar maande later geskei.”

Jamie pers haar lippe opmekaar en kyk na haar skoot. Sy skud haar kop baie effens. Toe sy opkyk, is daar trane in haar oë. “Het hy haar daarna nie weer gesien nie?”

“Sy vrou het met ’n brandweerman hier in New York getrou. Hulle het in Queens gewoon, en hy het Manhattan toe en terug gependel. Seker maar soos baie brandweermanne.”

Sy grys. “Is haar man dood in die aanvalle?” Daar is ’n opflikkering in haar oë.

“Ja. Joe wou bel en hoor hoe dit gaan, hoe sy haar man se dood verwerk, maar hy kon dit nie doen nie; hy was nie seker hoe sy ná soveel jaar sou reageer nie.” Clay kruis sy bene en sit agteroor, sy arm op die bank se rugleuning. “Hy het van die speurderopleiding hier gehoor.” Clay sien dat Reynolds amper by die einde van die eerste muur is. “Ek dink hy wil met haar in aanraking kom.”

Jamie frons, leun vooroor en rus met haar elmboë op die bank voor haar. “Iets aan die storie klink bekend. Wat was sy vrou se naam?”

“Wanda.” Clay dink ’n oomblik. “Ek kan nie haar van onthou nie.”

“Ek ken ’n Wanda; altans, ek het haar ontmoet. Ons het ’n paar maande gelede saam hier gebid. As ek reg onthou, het sy genoem dat sy tien jaar gelede ’n seuntjie verloor het.” Jamie sit regop. “Hoe het sy gelyk?”

“Ek’s nie seker hoe sy nou lyk nie.” Reynolds is by die agterste muur besig om die items wat die afgelope drie jaar bymekaargemaak is, te bestudeer. “Joe het ’n foto van haar op sy lessenaar, die laaste foto wat van haar en Jimmy geneem is. Sy was baie mooi, ’n bruin vrou met reguit hare. Groot, kinderlike oë.”

Jamie se oë word groot. “Dit moet sy wees.” Dan word haar opgewondenheid deur hartseer gedemp. “Sy’s ... ’n ongelukkige vrou, Clay. Daar was al te veel verliese.”

“Wag,” hy kan dit nie glo nie, “met ander woorde, jy kén haar? Jy het saam met haar gebid?” Hy is nog nie eens vier-en-twintig uur in New York nie, en daar het reeds ’n paar ongelooflike dinge gebeur. Hy wag nie vir Jamie se antwoord nie. “Het jy enige idee hoe ons haar kan kontak?” Dan dink hy aan iets. “En of sy gekontak sal wil word?”

Jamie raak aan haar voorkop. “Ek glo dit nie.”

“Wat?”

“Ek onthou nou net iets waarvoor ons gebid het, ek en Wanda.” Jamie kyk reguit na hom. “Ons het gebid dat sy haar eerste man sal opspoor. Sodat sy met hom kan vrede maak.”

Clay kry ’n koue rilling. Hy wil op sy knieë val en rondkyk, vir ingeval daar dalk engele om hulle is. “Weet jy hoe ons haar in die hande kan kry?”

“Ek dink so.” Sy staan op en beduie dat hy haar moet volg.

Hulle loop na die oorkant van die kapel waar ’n stel trappe na ’n personeelkamer lei. Aan die een kant is daar ’n klein kantoortjie met ’n liasseerkabinet. Clay wag in die deur terwyl Jamie soek, en na ’n paar sekondes bring sy ’n los bladsy te voorskyn. “Hier’s dit!”

“Wat?” Clay gee ’n tree nader en kyk deur vernoude oë na die papier.

“Wanda het dit oorweeg om hier te kom uithelp. Sy het ’n aansoekvorm ingevul, maar besluit dat dit nog te gou was. Ons het die inligting geliasseer vir ingeval sy van plan verander.” Jamie se oë vlieg oor die bladsy. “Sy het alles hier neergeskryf. Haar naam is Wanda Johnston en sy bly in Queens. Haar telefoonnommer, selfoonnommer, alles is hier.”

Clay kan nie praat nie. Die dag is reeds so vol wonderwerke dat hy hom nie in

woorde kan uitdruk nie. Uiteindelik kry hy dit reg om te vra: “Wat moet ons nou doen?”

Jamie haal haar skouers op. “Ek sal bel en haar vra. Ek kan nie die inligting sonder haar toestemming bekend maak nie.”

*“Oukei.” Clay knik. Here ... wees by Wanda. Gee dat sy hierdie ontmoeting sal wil hê. Ter wille van Joe.*

Die telefoon op die lessenaar is ’n ouer model met ’n kort koord. Jamie gaan sit, tel die gehoorstuk op en begin skakel. Ná ’n rukkie lui sy af en kyk weer na die aansoekvorm. “Ek gaan haar sel probeer.”

*Asseblief, Here ....* Só ’n spoedige antwoord sal Reynolds se geloof weer laat ontvlam en vir hom die nodige genesing bring.

Jamie skakel weer en wag. Haar gesig verhelder na ’n paar sekondes. “Wanda? Haai, dis Jamie Bryan van St. Paul’s. Hoe gaan dit met jou?” Stilte. “Jy gaan my nie glo nie. Onthou jy waarvoor ons gebed het toe jy hier was? Dat jy jou eerste man in die hande sal kry sodat julle kan vrede maak?” Sy glimlag vir Clay en haar oë dans. “Nou ja, hy en ’n vriend het vanoggend hier by die kapel ingestap.” Stilte. “Nee, ek’s ernstig. Joe wil jou telefoonnommer hê; ek het vir sy vriend gesê ek sal jou eers bel om te hoor of ek dit vir hom kan gee. Natuurlik. Ons sal dit uitwerk.” Jamie aarsel en dan lag sy hardop. “Ek weet. Ons dien ’n groot God.” Sy kyk betekenisvol na Clay. “Lyk my dis die boodskap vir vandag.”

Jamie lui af en hou die aansoekvorm op. “Ja!” Sy krabbel die twee nommers in ’n notaboekie neer en skeur die bladsy uit. “Sy wil hom sien!”

Dis die tweede maal vanoggend dat Clay haar wil omhels, maar hy weerstaan die versoeking. Hulle gaan saam ondertoe en Clay moet homself maan om kalm te bly. Die atmosfeer in die kapel is net so gedemp en somber soos voorheen. Reynolds is aan die regterkant van die agterste muur, steeds verdiep in die uitgestalde items.

Clay loop vooruit. Toe hy sy vriend bereik, tik hy hom op die skouer.

“Hoe nou?” Joe draai om. Sy oë is tranerig. “O, jammer.” Hy kyk op sy horlosie. “Lyk my ek’t ’n bietjie meegevoer geraak. Soos jy altyd sê, dit word laat.”

“Ek’s nie bekommerd oor die tyd nie.” Clay is steeds met ontsag gevul. Hy skud sy kop een maal. “Ek wil jou iets wys, ou vriend. Jy gaan dit nie glo nie.” Hy neem Joe aan die arm en lei hom na die middelste ry banke. Jamie volg hulle, en sy en Clay gaan sit aan weerskante van Joe.

“Joe, luister.” Clay kyk vinnig na Jamie en kan sy glimlag nie onderdruk nie. “Ek het jou storie vir Jamie vertel.” Hy aarsel, sy blik ondersoekend op sy vriend. “Sy ken vir Wanda; sy het haar aansoek om as vrywilliger te werk op lêer.”

“Wat?” Joe se mond hang oop toe hy na Jamie kyk. Sy ken bewe en hy sluk swaar. “Jy het wát?”

“Ek ken haar, Joe. Ek het haar ’n paar minute gelede gebel.” Jamie glimlag. “Sy wil jou sien.” Sy gee vir hom die papier met Wanda se nommers daarop.

“Ek het vir haar gesê jy sal bel.”

Joe neem die stukkie papier en staan daarna asof dit sal verdwyn as hy wegkyk. Hy byt op sy tande, staan op, en kyk eers na Jamie, dan na Clay. “As julle my sal verskoon.” Sy stem is skor, gevul met ’n dekade se vrees, verwyte en smart – maar gemeng met ’n onverbloemde vreugde. Hy glimlag deur sy trane. “Ek moet gaan bel.”

Hulle kyk hom agterna en Jamie draai na die voorkant van die kapel, na die groot wit kruis. Sy trek haar asem stadig in en kyk na Clay. “Wat ’n dag, nè?” Hy leun agteroor teen die harde hout. Dis sy beurt om na die uitstalling te gaan kyk en aan die mense te dink wat hulle lewens in die aanvalle verloor het. Maar hy is nie in staat om homself weg te skeur en die gesprek met hierdie vrou kort te knip nie. Ja, sy is getroud. Maar dit kan nie seermaak om met haar te praat nie, veral nie ná wat hulle vanoggend deur is nie.

“Wat is jou verhaal, Clay?” Sy het ’n gemoedelikheid aan haar, ’n sagte stem en oë wat hom aan die hart ruk. “Getroud? Kinders?”

Die vraag is nie suggestief nie, bloot belangstellend. Clay sit met sy elmboog op die rugleuning. “Ek was nog nooit getroud nie. My broer bly ook in Kalifornië en ek kuier gereeld by hom en sy gesin.” Hy gee ’n lighartige laggie. “Daar was al ’n hele paar meisies, net nooit die regte een nie.”

“Hmmm.” Sy glimlag tergend. “’n Don Juan, met ander woorde?”

“Kwalik.” Clay gee ’n laggie. “My werk hou my besig; ek kom nie veel uit nie. Wanneer die tyd reg is, wil ek graag trou en my eie gesin hê. Die Here sal maar moet wys hoe en wanneer.” Hy vou sy arms. “Wat van jou? Wat doen jou man?”

Die lig verdwyn uit haar oë en haar gesig verstrak. Sy kyk vir ’n paar sekondes na haar hande.

Clay kyk ondersoekend na haar en wens hy kan help. Is daar huweliksprobleme? Hy wou nie ’n sensitiewe snaar aanraak nie. “Jamie? Ek’s jammer.”

Sy kyk op. “Dis oukei.”

“Dis net dat ... ” Hy kyk na haar linkerhand. “Jy dra ’n trouing, en ek’t gedink ... ”

“Moenie jammer wees nie. Ek het dit nog nie afgehaal nie.” Haar oë is droog, maar dis duidelik dat sy iewers binnekant huil. “Jake was ’n brandweerman. Hy ... hy is in die aanvalle dood.”

Natuurlik. Clay laat sak sy kop en blaas sy asem hard uit. Hoekom het hy nie self die afleiding gemaak nie? Sy het alleen met die veerboot ingekom om as vrywilliger te kom werk by ’n plek wat basies ’n monument van die Twin Towers is. Hy tel sy kop stadig op en kyk na haar. “Ek’s jammer, Jamie.”

“Die brandweer het daardie dag meer as vierhonderd man verloor. En die polisie het ook groot verliese gely.” Sy snuif en probeer deur haar hartseer glimlag. “Ek’s nie alleen in my verlies nie.”

Dis waarskynlik ’n sin wat sy honderde kere ’n maand herhaal, maar Clay is getref deur hoe moeilik dit steeds ná drie jaar vir haar is om dit te sê. Hy wil

meer weet, maar dit voel nie na die regte tyd nie. “Het jy kinders?”

“’n Dogtertjie. Sierra.” Die verwysing na die dogtertjie laat Jamie se oë ophelder. Sy snuif. “Ons is baie na aan mekaar. Sy is nou sewe, in graad twee.”

Reynolds kom by die voordeur in en dis asof sy glimlag die hele kapel verwarm. Toe hy naby hulle is, hou hy sy selfoon in die lug en kyk stralend na hulle. “Ek ontmoet haar vir middagete.”

“Regtig?” Clay sit regop. “Is jy gereed daarvoor?” Die reünie sal ongetwyfeld emosioneel wees, veral as Joe alles vir haar gaan sê wat hy van plan is om te sê.

Sy gesig raak ernstig. “Ek was jare gelede al gereed.” Hy gaan sit langs Clay. “Bid asseblief vir my, sal jy? Ek het lanklaas.” Hy kyk weer na sy horlosie. “Dis twaalfuur. Ek’t vir haar gesê dat ek met ’n taxi na die restaurant toe sal gaan.” Hy kyk na Clay. “Ek sien jou by oriëntasie.”

“Dis nou vir jou ’n ware vriend.” Clay grinnik vir hom. “Los my op ons eerste dag in die middel van Manhattan.”

“Ek maak halfeen klaar.” Jamie kyk na Clay. “Ek skiet jou vir middagete.” Jamie staan op en trek haar vingers deur haar donker hare.

“Dis nie nodig nie.” Clay se hart gaan steeds na haar uit. Hulle het nog nie hulle gesprek voltooi nie. “Ek sal iets kry om my mee besig te hou.”

“Clay ... ” Die hartseer in haar oë is nie meer so fel nie. “Jy het my lewe gered. Ek dink ek kan ’n middagete bekostig.”

Joe gee ’n laggie nog voordat Clay iets kan sê. “Probeer jy maar ongelukkig lyk omdat ek jou hier los, ou pel.” Joe knipoog vir hom en lig ’n wenkbrou vir Jamie. “Ek dink julle sal heeltemal goed genoeg regkom sonder my.”

# Chapter THIRTEEN

Rain was falling hard again, gusting in torrents and pounding on the roof as Joe left St. Paul's.

Jamie looked up at the old ornate ceiling. "Hope it isn't hailing."

"Could be; it's in the forecast." Clay met her eyes. "He's gonna get soaked."

"Somehow—" Jamie smiled—"I don't think he'll mind." Jamie spotted an older man come through the entrance. She stood up. "Well, back to work."

"I'll look around." He pulled his legs beneath the bench so she could get by. Then he stood and headed toward the closest display, the one near the exit. "Maybe I'll start at the end and go against the crowd."

"Suit yourself." She met his eyes once more before she turned around. It wasn't until she was a few steps away that she felt a sense of relief. By starting at the opposite side, he'd miss seeing Jake, and that was just as well. She wasn't ready to talk about him with Clay, not when her heart was whirling around inside her.

A draft whistled through the old building, but Jamie didn't feel the cold. Not with her mind racing out of control. In three years she'd never met anyone like Clay. What was it about him? His strength, or the way he'd so easily protected her on the ferry? Or was it his eyes? The way she felt she'd known him all her life?

Whatever it was, he made her feel something she hadn't felt since Jake.

And that's why her head was spinning. How dare she allow herself to compare a stranger with the man she'd loved since she was twelve years old? She clenched her hands and chided herself. *Get a grip, Jamie...*

She could shout it at herself, but there was no denying what was happening inside her. She felt wonderful.

The man looked up as she approached him. He was well dressed, with



the air of an executive at one of the financial firms in lower Manhattan. He was still standing near the entrance—not far from Jake’s picture and Sierra’s letter. His blank expression told her he wanted assistance.

“Hello.” She held out her hand, and he took it. “I’m Jamie Bryan, a volunteer here. Can I help you with anything?”

The man took his hat off and tucked it beneath his arm. “I’m Wilbur George.” He stared at the collection along the first wall. “My son worked for Cantor-Fitzgerald.”

That was all he needed to say.

Cantor-Fitzgerald had been located near the top of the South Tower; the death toll for that firm was the largest for any company hurt by the terrorist attacks. Jamie lowered her voice. “He didn’t make it out?”

“No.” His mouth made a straight line. “He...he had a wife and two children. A boy and a girl. The wife...she’s getting married again in March.”

The idea of people remarrying was coming up more often lately. Not that all of those widowed by the attacks waited this long. Some would wait much longer. But three years seemed a benchmark, of sorts. Jamie let the man set the pace of the conversation.

“I’ve met the young man; he’s very nice. Our daughter-in-law will be happy with him, and so will the kids.” He stared at his shoes for a minute and gave a sad shake of his head. When he looked back up, his stoic veneer was cracked down the middle. “I’m here because of my wife.” He blinked three times fast. “She’s not handling it well.”

“I’m sorry.” Jamie motioned to the nearest pew. “Can you sit and talk for a minute?”

The man nodded and followed her. He took his overcoat off and laid it across the pew’s wooden back. His hat remained clutched in his hands. “We aren’t really praying people, you see.” His sad laugh floated around her. “My son was. Good Christian boy, his wife too. But my wife and I never really...we never believed much in God.”

“I see.” Jamie studied the man. *Lord, let this be the day he changes his mind.*

The man worked his fingers into the rim of his gray flannel hat. “Lately I’ve started wondering.” He glanced around the chapel. “Look at all the good that’s come from people since that terrible day. Look at the beauty of life itself.” He looked at her. “One of my partners at work lost a niece in the Twin Towers. His family pulled together and prayed that her death wouldn’t be in vain.”

Jamie listened, praying.

“That man’s a new person today.” Wilbur George worked his mouth sideways, the way men sometimes did when they didn’t want to cry. “All he talks about is God this and God that, and whether the Lord would be happy with his dealings at work and how he can live some way that would please his Creator.” He hesitated. “At first I thought he was wacky. But now...”

“It’s starting to make sense?”

“Yes.” His eyes widened at Jamie’s answer. “That’s it exactly.” His shoulders drooped a notch. “At least for me. For my wife, she says if there was a God, He’d be her enemy after what happened to our boy.”

A heaviness weighed on Jamie. It was the same story again and again and again. Different faces, different names, different floors of the Twin Towers, but so often when the walking wounded found their way here it was with one question. How could God let it happen?

“I guess the question, Mr. George, is whether *you* believe.” She studied him. *Father, open his heart. Please.* “Do you believe in God and His Son, Jesus?”

“I do.” His eyes shone for the first time since he’d walked into the chapel. “I really do.”

She wanted to tread lightly, but if she didn’t get to the crux of faith she was wasting her time. The real hope was found in the rest of the story. “Do you want Jesus as your Savior?”

The man frowned. “That’s where I’m a little confused. I thought…” He looked around the chapel. “I thought someone here might be able to help me. That way I could help my wife.”

He looked at the wall of artifacts and letters again. “I’ve done some reading, talked to a few people including my partner at work. All good things are from God—” his eyes found hers again—“right?”

For the next ten minutes Jamie talked with the man about the basics of faith in Christ. All the things she’d learned from Jake’s Bible and his journal, from a hundred or so church services since the terrorist attacks and from her training at St. Paul’s. At the end of their conversation, the man was nodding, practically desperate to have Jesus as his Savior.

They prayed together, and when they were finished, Jamie gave him ideas that might help his wife find faith in God. When they were done talking, he looked like a mountain had been lifted from his shoulders.

“Thank you, Jamie. I want to take a look around.” He patted her hand. “I haven’t been here before.” He stood and slipped his coat on. Then he stopped and looked at her. “All good things are from God, right?”

“Right. That’s what the Bible says.”

“Then God didn’t make those towers fall. Something evil did, because evil exists in our world.”

Jamie gave him a sad smile. “Yes, Mr. George. That’s right.”

As he walked away, she looked at her watch. Her shift was over; she and Clay could head out for lunch. She stood, grateful for her time with the man. Without that, she would have been consumed by one thought.

Counting down the minutes until she could go someplace and talk to Clay without interrupting the grieving going on all around her.

She found him not quite finished with the exit wall. “Clay?”

He stepped back, his focus still on a child’s letter posted near a photo of a police officer. “It’s so sad, Jamie. The pictures and letters, even from people who weren’t touched by the attacks, at least not personally.” He looked at her, his eyes glistening. “The loss was so enormous.”

"I know." She resisted the urge to glance across the room at the first display table, the one where Jake's picture was. "Even after working here all this time, it's bigger than I can really grasp."

"I didn't get halfway through." He drew back from the wall and came up alongside her. "Maybe I can finish it another day."

Jamie thought about Jake. "You could." She cast him a sad smile. "It's really just more of the same."

"I guess." He drew in a sharp breath and peered through the closest stained-glass window. "You have an umbrella?"

"You mean you don't?" She was teasing him and it felt better than she could've dreamed. "What, it doesn't rain in California?"

He tossed her a sheepish look. "Not much."

"Don't worry." She held up her finger. "Wait here, I'll get my coat and be right back. And yes—" she started up the stairs toward the break room—"I have an umbrella."

They caught a cab and found a quiet café fifteen blocks north on Broadway. It was busy, but Clay spotted a table near the front window, overlooking the bustling sidewalk. "Good?"

Jamie nodded. "I like people watching."

"Me too." He stared at the parade passing by, businesspeople mostly, some obvious tourists, a random group of kids decked out in black T-shirts and dog collars. Together they carried enough umbrellas to form an overhang along the sidewalk. Clay rested his forearms on the table. "Doesn't it ever slow down?"

"Not much." She smiled. "I can only take Manhattan in small doses."

He looked at the crowds outside. "I can see why." His heart was racing, even faster than it had that morning on the ferry. What was he doing here? He'd been in town a few hours and he was having lunch with a beautiful widow? Clay Michaels, the guy who didn't rush anything?

The whole scene couldn't have been more out of character for him than if he spiked his hair and dyed it pink. At his soft laugh, Jamie looked

at him.

“What’s so funny?” She lowered her chin.

“Me.” He drew invisible circles on the table with his finger. “Joe told me New York would be exciting, but I wasn’t sure.”

“And then I enter the picture.” She eased off her coat and slid it over the back of the chair.

“That’s for sure.” He laughed out loud this time, a laugh that was brief and full of amazement. “I had no idea anyplace, not even New York, could be that exciting.”

The waiter brought them ice water and took their order, chicken sandwiches with tea for her and black coffee for him. When he was gone, Jamie put her elbows on the table, linked her fingers, and rested her chin. “Do you think he would’ve shot me?”

Clay wanted to drown in her eyes. She was making his head spin and he barely knew her. “I’ve asked myself that a dozen times today. Usually punky kids like that won’t shoot someone in broad daylight. A move like that could wind them up on death row.” He brought his knuckles together and took a drink of his water. “But you believed them, otherwise you would’ve screamed.”

“I tried to catch your attention, but I didn’t think you saw me.”

He felt his eyebrows lift a notch. “Oh, I saw you.”

Her shy smile as she pulled her glass closer was pure sweetness. “Is that a good thing?”

“Yes. Very good.” He studied her. The conversation was easy, comfortable. The same way it had been in the ferry captain’s office and at St. Paul’s. It wasn’t the rush of the moment with the criminals or the emotion of the chapel. It was Jamie. She was as transparent as a summer breeze.

“So you really think they would’ve killed me if I got off the ferry with them?”

A chill ran down his spine, and he felt his smile fade. “I don’t want to

think about what would've happened if you'd done that."

She looked out the window. "At first I was going to scream anyway. I figured, let them shoot me. Someone would save me or I'd wind up in heaven. I'd win either way."

"Why didn't you?"

"Because of Sierra."

"Your little girl." Clay leaned against the window and watched her. Emotions played out on her face. "You just started telling me about her when Joe came back. She's seven?"

"Yes." She looked at him again. "Long golden hair and a heart as big as the ocean. She's very special."

*She must be, if she's anything like you.* "What does she like to do?"

"She likes cats and horses and movie nights with me. Right now her favorite is *The Lion King*, but for at least two years it was *The Little Mermaid*." Jamie laughed and poked her straw at the ice in her water. "I enjoy her so much."

"I can see that." Clay hesitated. "What was your husband like?" Clay already knew the answer; he must've been a great guy. The haunting look in her eyes at the chapel earlier told him that the loss had all but killed her. Still, he wanted to hear it from her, wanted to give her a chance to talk about him if she wanted to.

For the first time that day, a wall went up in Jamie's eyes. "We were very close." She bit the inside of her lip. "I fell in love with him when I was twelve. We...we grew up down the street from each other. His dad was a firefighter." She pressed the corners of her lips up, but it was hardly a smile. "That's all Jake ever wanted to be."

Clay didn't want to push, but he needed to know her, to find out what made her cry when she was alone at night, what memories kept her going when she didn't want to take another step. "Did he share your faith?"

A knowing look crossed her face, as if the answer wasn't an easy one. But she only nodded and took a sip of her water. "Yes. He loved the Lord

very much.”

He must’ve loved Jamie very much too. After all, she still wore his ring. The feeling was clearly mutual.

“Jake and I shared something rare. There’s never been anyone else.” Jamie hugged herself and looked straight at him. “It hasn’t been easy.”

The sense that he should go to her, pull her into his arms, and soothe away the hurt, was so strong this time he almost gave in. Instead, he willed himself to stay seated. “Is that why you help out at St. Paul’s?”

“I think so. It’s complicated, really. I go for a lot of reasons, but yes.” She looked out the window again. “It’s what Jake would’ve done; I guess I do it as a way of remembering him.”

Clay studied the woman across from him. The connection he felt to her was something he couldn’t explain. The fact that she was still in love with her dead husband didn’t bother him. This woman was loyal to the core, and after loving someone since she was twelve? Of course she still had feelings for him. She always would.

The waiter came with their sandwiches and hot drinks. When he left, Clay met her eyes. “Pray?”

She nodded and bowed her head.

“Lord, we thank You for this food, but more than that, we thank You for bringing us together this morning. You answered both our prayers. Mine that I would make a difference, and Jamie’s. It’s all You, Father, and for that we thank You. Amen.”

“Amen.” She was smiling when she looked up, and he sensed she didn’t want to talk about her dead husband anymore; not now, anyway. She used her knife to cut her sandwich into smaller pieces. “Okay, Clay. What about you? Isn’t three weeks a long time to be away from work?”

“Actually it’s four.” He took the top slices of bread off his sandwich and shook salt over the meat inside. His body was a priority, one he took care of, but salt was one of his few vices. He used it liberally.

“You’re here four weeks?” She looked surprised. “I thought Joe said

it was three weeks of training.”

“It is.” He put the top pieces of bread back on his sandwich, then looked at her for a few seconds. If he told her the reason, would she think differently of him? He took a slow breath. It didn’t matter; he couldn’t be anything less than honest with her. “I had one week off before I left.”

“Vacation?” She held her sandwich, but she held it in midair waiting for his answer.

“I was in a gunfight. A man was coming at me, firing an AK-47.” Clay searched her eyes looking for her reaction. “I had to kill him.”

Jamie’s eyes widened. “So they fired you?”

“No.” He smiled. She wasn’t repulsed at the shooting so much as worried that he’d lost his job. “No, it’s standard procedure when a suspect is shot and killed by an officer during a crime. It’s a paid leave; they hold an investigation and make a report. As long as everything was on the level, the officer reports back in three or four weeks.”

“Oh. I didn’t know that.” She took a bite of her sandwich.

“My captain told me not to worry about it. There was nothing else I could do.” He thought about telling her how close he’d come to getting killed himself, but it didn’t seem like the right time. “When I get back they’re promoting me to detective.” He grinned. “That’s the long answer to your question. I’m here because I need the training, and Joe picked New York City.”

“Oh.” Understanding filled her eyes. She put her hands around her cup of tea and held it to her lips. “Because of Wanda.”

“Right.”

The conversation moved to what the training would include and how long he’d been an officer, then went back to the men on the ferry.

“Did you really see a gun?” She tilted her head, her eyes doubtful. “You were all the way across the deck.”

He grinned. She was very perceptive. “I saw the guy move in on you, and I could tell by your face that you didn’t know him. I told Joe, and we



both kept an eye on you. When the second guy came over and pressed in against you, the look on your face was clear even from where we were sitting.”

“I was scared to death.”

“Yes.” His hand itched to hold hers, but the idea was ludicrous. He clenched his fingers. “That’s what I saw. Then the second guy jerked something near your ribs, and you jumped. I asked Joe if he saw a gun, and he said, ‘Why, yes, I did.’ So I said, ‘Well then, I better go get it from him.’ And Joe said, ‘Me too.’”

Jamie giggled and took a long sip of her tea. “But you never actually saw one?”

“Well, see, the thing was, it *felt* like we did.”

“And as it turned out—” Jamie was smiling, playing along with him —“your feeling was right.”

He waited a beat, breathing her in. “It’s been right a lot lately.”

Her eyes told him she understood what he was saying. Her cheeks grew a shade darker. “Clay?”

“Yes, Jamie.” *God...let me see her again. Don’t let this be the last time we’re together.*

“Can I see you again? While you’re here?” Her fingers were shaking, though she tried to still them on her teacup.

Clay wasn’t sure whether to laugh or look for angels again. The answers were pouring down as fast as the rain. He wouldn’t tell her about his prayer. That could come later. Besides, he didn’t want her to think he took her question lightly. In light of what she’d just told him about her husband, it couldn’t have been easy to ask it. He nodded. “I’d like that.”

“You’re staying on Staten Island, right?”

“Yes. Cheap hotels, or so I’m told.”

“Much cheaper.” The nervousness—or whatever it was—lifted. She smiled the comfortable way she’d smiled at him on the ferry and at St. Paul’s. “Could I make dinner for you and Joe?”

Clay felt his heart soar. He never took his eyes from hers as he nodded. "That would be perfect."

Jamie had to catch the ferry back to Staten Island to pick up her daughter, so they finished their lunches and took cabs in different directions—him to the NYPD station staging the training orientation, her to Battery Park. He resisted the urge to hug her. She was no longer a victim needing to be held. She was a woman who, in an instant's time, had captured his thoughts and imagination.

Maybe even his heart.

Was it her vulnerability or the way she looked straight to his soul? *Cool it, Michaels. Slow down.* He turned his thoughts to Joe. How had his friend done with Wanda? Had Joe been able to apologize the way he planned, or was Wanda still upset with him?

He tried to imagine their encounter, but instead saw Jamie's face, the way she'd looked on the ferry when she walked past, her terrified eyes when the thugs accosted her, the way she'd let him hold her in the captain's office...

All of it played again and again in his mind. As the cab let him off at the police department, two very strong thoughts stayed with him. First, this new friendship would have to develop slowly.

And second, how many hours he had until he saw her again.

## Dertien

Dit het weer begin sous en die reën val daverend op die dak toe Joe hulle groet en loop.

Jamie kyk op na die versierde plafon. "Ek hoop nie dit hael nie."

"Kan wees; hulle het voorspel dat daar 'n moontlikheid is." Clay ontmoet haar oë. "Joe gaan deurnat word."

"Om die een of ander rede dink ek nie hy gaan omgee nie," glimlag Jamie. Dan sien sy 'n middeljarige man by die voordeur inkom. Sy staan op. "Ek moet seker aan die werk kom."

"Ek gaan solank rondkyk." Hy trek sy bene onder die bank in sodat sy kan verbykom. Toe staan hy op en loop na die naaste uitstalling toe, die een naby

die uitgang. “Dalk moet ek by die laaste een begin en teen die stroom beweeg.”

“Nes jy wil.” Sy kyk weer na hom voordat sy omdraai. Dis eers toe sy ’n entjie weg is dat die verligting deur haar versprei. Deur die uitstalling verkeerd om aan te pak, sal hy nie vir Jake sien nie, en dit sal goed wees. Sy is nog nie gereed om met Clay oor hom te praat nie, nie terwyl haar hart so half van stryk af is nie.

Daar trek ’n luggie deur die ou gebou, maar Jamie is nie bewus van die koue nie. Nie terwyl haar gedagtes herwaarts en derwaarts koers nie. In drie jaar het sy nooit iemand soos Clay ontmoet nie. Wat is dit aan hom? Sy sterkte, of die gemak waarmee hy haar op die veerboot beskerm het? Of is dit sy oë? Die feit dat dit voel asof sy hom nog altyd geken het?

Wat dit ook al is, sy voel iets by hom wat sy laas by Jake gevoel het.

En dis wat haar kop so deurmekaar het. Hoe durf sy haarself toelaat om ’n vreemdeling met die man te vergelyk wat sy op twaalf liefgekry het? Sy klem haar hande saam en berispe haarself. *Ruk jou reg, Jamie ...*

Hoe hard sy ook al met haarself praat, sy kan nie ontken wat besig is om binne haar te gebeur nie. Sy voel wonderlik.

Die man kyk op toe sy hom nader. Hy is netjies geklee en sy houding laat haar aan ’n direkteur by een van die finansiële instansies in Manhattan dink. Hy staan naby die ingang – nie ver van Jake se foto en Sierra se brief nie. Aan sy uitdrukking kan Jamie sien hy weet nie hoe en waar volgende nie.

“Hallo.” Sy steek haar hand uit en hy neem dit. “Ek’s Jamie Bryan, ’n vrywilliger hier. Kan ek met enigiets help?”

Die man haal sy hoed af en druk dit onder sy arm in. “Ek’s Wilbur George.” Hy kyk na die versameling teen die eerste muur. “My seun het vir Cantor-Fitzgerald gewerk.”

Dis al wat hy hoef te sê.

Cantor-Fitzgerald se kantore was op een van die boonste vloere van die suidelike toring geleë; daardie firma se dodetal was hoër as enige ander maatskappy wat deur die terroriste-aanvalle geraak is. Jamie praat sagter. “Hy het dit nie oorleef nie, nè?”

“Nee.” Sy mond is ’n reguit lyn. “Hy ... hy het ’n vrou en twee kinders gehad. ’n Seun en ’n dogter. Die vrou ... sy trou weer in Maart.”

Sy hoor deesdae van al hoe meer mense wat weer trou. Nie dat almal wat ’n eggenoot in die aanvalle verloor het, so lank wag nie. Aan die ander kant, sommige sal baie langer wag. Maar drie jaar blyk ’n soort norm te wees. Jamie laat toe dat die man die gesprek lei.

“Ek het die man al ontmoet; ’n oulike ou. Ons skoondogter en die kinders sal baie gelukkig by hom wees.” Hy kyk lank na sy skoene en skud sy kop. Toe hy weer opkyk, is daar ’n krakie in sy onverstoorbaarheid. “Ek het eintlik gekom oor my vrou.” Hy knip sy oë ’n paar keer vinnig. “Sy hanteer dit nie goed nie.”

“Ek’s jammer.” Jamie wys na die naaste bank. “Wil jy nie ’n oomblik gesels

nie?”

Die man knik en volg haar. Hy trek sy jas uit en hang dit oor die bank se rugkant. Sy hoed bly in sy hande. “Ons is nie regtig godsdienstig nie, sien.” Sy hartseer laggie hang in die lug. “My seun was. ’n Goeie Christenmens, sy vrou ook. Maar ek en my vrou het nooit regtig ... in God geglo nie.”

“Ek sien.” Jamie bestudeer die man se gesig. *Here, gee dat hy vandag van mening verander.*

Die man draai sy netjiese grys hoed om en om in sy hande. “Die afgelope tyd het ek begin dink.” Hy kyk om hom rond. “Kyk na al die goedheid wat daardie verskriklike dag in mense na vore gebring het. Kyk na die skoonheid van die lewe self.” Hy kyk na haar. “Een van my vennote by die werk het ’n dogter in die Twin Towers verloor. Sy familie het saamgestaan en gebed dat haar dood nie tevergeefs moes wees nie.”

Jamie luister biddend.

“Daardie man is vandag ’n nuwe mens.” Wilbur George se mond vertrek asof hy hard teen sy trane baklei. “Hy praat die hele tyd oor God. Oor of die Here gelukkig is met sy werk en hoe hy kan lewe om sy Skepper te behaag.” Hy aarsel. “Aan die begin het ek gedink hy is nie lekker in sy kop nie. Maar nou ... ”

“Nou begin dit sin maak?”

“Ja.” Sy oë word groot. “Presies.” Sy skouers hang effens. “Vir my, in elk geval. My vrou sê indien daar ’n God is, sou Hy haar vyand wees ná wat met ons seun gebeur het.”

’n Swarigheid kom oor Jamie. Die storie bly altyd dieselfde. Verskillende gesigte, verskillende name, verskillende vloere van die Twin Towers, maar wanneer die gewondes hier uitkom, is dit telkens dieselfde vraag. Hoe kon God dit laat gebeur het?

“Die eintlike vraag, meneer George, is of jý glo.” Sy kyk ondersoekend na hom. *Vader, maak sy hart oop. Asseblief.* “Glo jý in God en sy Seun, Jesus?”

“Ja.” Sy oë lewe vir die eerste keer sedert hy ingekom het. “Ek glo.”

Sy wil versigtig te werk gaan, maar as sy nie by die kern van geloof uitkom nie, mors sy haar tyd. Die ware hoop lê in die res van die verhaal. “Wil jy Jesus as jou Verlosser aanneem?”

Die man frons. “Dis waar ek nie heeltemal seker is nie. Ek’t gedink ... ” Hy kyk om hom rond. “Ek het gedink iemand hier sal my kan help. Sodat ek my vrou kan help.”

Hy kyk weer na die muur met aandenkings en briewe. “Ek het ’n bietjie nagelees en met ’n paar mense gesels, insluitend my vennoot. Alles wat goed is, kom van die Here af ... ” Sy oë kom terug na haar toe. “Is ek reg?”

Vir die volgende tien minute praat Jamie met die man oor wat dit beteken om in Christus te glo. Alles wat sy in Jake se Bybel en sy dagboek gelees het, alles wat sy sedert die aanvalle by honderde eredienste en haar opleiding by St. Paul’s geleer het. Aan die einde van hulle gesprek sit die man en knik terwyl sy praat, so te sê desperaat om Jesus as Verlosser te hê.

Hulle bid saam en toe hulle klaar is, gee Jamie hom raad oor hoe hy sy vrou kan help om by die Here uit te kom. Aan die einde van hulle gesprek lyk dit asof daar 'n berg van sy skouers af is.

“Dankie, Jamie. Ek wil 'n bietjie gaan rondkyk.” Hy raak aan haar hand. “Ek was nog nie hier nie.” Hy staan op en trek sy jas aan. Dan steek hy vas en kyk na haar. “Alles wat goed is, kom van die Here af, nè?”

“Dis reg. Dit staan in die Bybel.”

“Dan is dit nie die Here wat die ineenstorting van die torings veroorsaak het nie. Iets boos het, want daar is boosheid in ons wêreld.”

Jamie glimlag hartseer. “Ja, meneer George. Dis reg.”

Toe hy wegloop, kyk sy op haar horlosie. Haar skof is verby; sy en Clay kan iets gaan eet. Sy staan op, dankbaar vir haar tyd saam met die man. As dit nie daarvoor was nie, sou sy net op een gedagte kon fokus.

Die aantal minute voordat sy en Clay iewers heen kan gaan om te gesels sonder om die gedempte hartseer rondom hulle te versteur.

Sy kry hom waar hy nog by die agterste muur is. “Clay?”

Hy tree terug, sy aandag steeds by 'n kind se briefie langs 'n foto van 'n polisieman. “Dis so hartseer, Jamie. Die foto's en briewe, selfs van mense wat nie deur die aanvalle geraak is nie, altans nie persoonlik nie.” Hy kyk met blink oë na haar. “Dit was 'n reuse verlies.”

“Ek weet.” Sy weerstaan die impuls om na die eerste tafel aan die oorkant van die lokaal te kyk, die een waar Jake se foto uitgestal word. “Ek werk al hoe lank hier, maar dit bly oorweldigend.”

“Ek is nog nie eens halfpad nie.” Hy draai weg van die muur en kom staan by haar. “Dalk kan ek op 'n ander dag weer kom.”

Jamie dink aan Jake. “Jy kan.” Sy gee hom 'n hartseer glimlag. “Die res van die uitstalling is eintlik maar net 'n herhaling van wat jy reeds gesien het.”

“Seker maar.” Hy trek sy asem skerp in en kyk deur die naaste gebrandskilderde venster. “Het jy 'n sambreel?”

“Jy bedoel jy het nie?” Sy terg hom en geniet dit meer as wat sy sou dink. “Wat, reën dit nie in Kalifornië nie?”

Hy gee haar 'n bedremmelde kyk. “Nie veel nie.”

“Moenie bekommerd wees nie.” Sy hou haar vinger op. “Wag hier. Ek wil net gou my jas gaan kry. En ja,” sy trek al by die trappies wat na die personeelkamer lei, “ek het 'n sambreel.”

Hulle neem 'n taxi na 'n gesellige restaurantjie in Broadway. Dis besig, maar Clay sien 'n tafel naby die voorste venster wat op die besige sypaadjie uitkyk.

“Is dit reg daar?”

Jamie knik. “Ek geniet dit om na mense te kyk.”

“Ek ook.” Hy staar na die parade verbygangers, bestaande uit hoofsaaklik sakemense, 'n paar toeriste gewapen met kameras, en 'n groep kinders in swart T-hemde en hondehalsbande. Altesaam dra hulle genoeg sambrele om 'n afdak oor die sypaadjie te vorm. Clay rus met sy voorarms op die tafel.

“Raak dit ooit rustig?”

“Nie juis nie.” Sy glimlag. “Ek kan Manhattan net in klein dosisse hanteer.” Sy oë dwaal weer na die mense buitekant. “Ek kan sien hoekom.” Sy hart klop nou selfs nog vinniger as vanoggend op die veerboot. Wat maak hy hier? Hy is nog nie eens ’n dag in die stad nie, en hy sit reeds saam met ’n baie mooi vrou in ’n restaurant. Clay Michaels, wat amper nooit impulsief is nie.

Die hele scenario is net so vreemd aan sy aard soos om sy hare punk te sny en pienk te kleur. Jamie kyk op toe hy saggies lag.

“Wat’s so snaaks?” Sy laat sak haar ken.

“Ek.” Hy trek onsigbare sirkels op die tafel. “Joe het vir my gesê dat New York opwindend gaan wees, maar ek was nie seker nie.”

“En toe verskyn ek op die toneel.” Sy trek haar jas uit en hang dit oor die rugkant van haar stoel.

“Jy kan dít weer sê.” Hierdie keer is sy lag vol verwondering. “Ek het geen idee gehad dat enige plek, nie eens New York, só opwindend kon wees nie.”

Die kelner bring vir hulle koue water en neem hulle bestelling: hoendertoebroodjies, tee vir haar en swart koffie vir hom. Toe hy weg is, plaas Jamie haar elmboë op die tafel, vleg haar vingers inmekaar en laat haar ken daarop rus. “Dink jy hy sou my geskiet het?”

Clay wil in haar oë verdrink. Sy laat sy kop draai en hy ken haar skaars. “Ek vra myself dit al die hele dag af. Gewoonlik sal daai soort ouens iemand nie helder oordag skiet nie. Hulle weet hulle sal reguit dodesel toe gestuur word.” Hy neem ’n sluk van sy water. “Maar jy het hulle geglo, anders sou jy geskree het.”

“Ek het probeer om jou aandag te trek, en ek’t nie gedink jy sien my nie.”

Sy wenkbroue trek effens op. “O, ek het jou verseker gesien.”

Hy verkyk hom aan haar skaam glimlag toe sy haar glas nadertrek. “Is dit ’n goeie ding?”

“Ja. Baie goed.” Hy bestudeer haar gesig. Hulle gesels gemaklik. Nes dit in die kaptein van die veerboot se kantoor en later in St. Paul’s was. Dit is nie die opwindende van die arrestasie op die veerboot of die emosie van die kapel nie. Dis Jamie. Sy is oop en opreg.

“Dink jy hulle sou my doodgemaak het as ek saam met hulle gegaan het?”

’n Rilling gaan teen sy ruggraat af en sy glimlag raak weg. “Ek wil nie dink aan wat kon gebeur het as jy dit gedoen het nie.”

Sy kyk deur die venster. “Aanvanklik wou ek skree. Ek het gedink hulle moet my maar skiet as hulle wou. Óf iemand sou my red, óf ek sou hemel toe gaan. Ek sou albei kante toe wen.”

“Hoekom het jy nie?”

“Ek het aan Sierra gedink.”

“Jou klein dogtertjie.” Clay leun teen die venster en verloor hom in die emosies wat oor haar gesig speel. “Jy het my net van haar begin vertel toe Joe teruggekom het. Sy is sewe?”

“Ja.” Sy kyk weer na hom. “Lang, blonde hare en ’n hartjie van goud. Sy’s baie spesiaal.”

Sy moet wees, as sy enigsins soos jy is. “Waarvan hou sy?”

“Sy hou van katte en perde en videoaande saam met my. Op die oomblik is *The Lion King* haar gunsteling, maar vir minstens twee jaar was dit *The Little Mermaid*.” Jamie lag en roer die ys in haar glas met haar strooitjie. “Ek geniet haar vreeslik.”

“Ek kan dit sien.” Clay aarsel. “Vertel my van jou man.” Clay weet alreeds dat hy ’n wonderlike man moes wees. Die kyk in haar oë by die kapel het verklap dat die verlies haar so te sê vernietig het. Nietemin, hy wil dit by haar hoor, wil haar die kans gee om oor hom te praat as sy wil.

Vir die eerste keer daardie dag trek daar ’n sluier oor Jamie se oë. “Ons was baie na aan mekaar.” Sy byt die binnekant van haar lip. “Ek was twaalf toe ek op hom verlief geraak het. Ons ... ons het in dieselfde straat gebly. Sy pa was ’n brandweerman.” Haar mondhoëke lig, maar dis kwalik ’n glimlag. “Dis al wat Jake ooit wou wees.”

Clay wil nie pols nie, maar hy moet haar ken, moet uitvind wat haar laat huil wanneer sy snags alleen is, watter herinnering haar staande hou wanneer sy nie nog ’n tree wil gee nie. “Het hy jou geloof gedeel?”

Die uitdrukking wat oor haar gesig flits, verklap dat dit nie ’n maklike vraag is nie. Maar sy knik en neem ’n sluk van haar water. “Ja. Hy was baie lief vir die Here.”

Hy moes baie lief vir Jamie ook gewees het. Sy dra immers steeds sy ring. Dis duidelik dat die gevoel wedersyd was.

“Ek en Jake het ’n besondere verhouding gehad. Daar was nog nooit iemand anders nie.” Jamie vou haar arms om haarself en kyk reguit na hom. “Dit was nie maklik nie.”

Die begeerte om na haar toe te gaan, haar in sy arms te neem en te troos is hierdie keer so sterk dat hy amper swig. Maar hy dwing homself om te bly sit. “Is dit waarom jy by St. Paul’s help?”

“Ek dink so. Dis eintlik gekompliseerd. Ek gaan om ’n hele paar redes, maar ja.” Sy kyk weer deur die venster. “Dis wat Jake sou doen; ek dink ek doen dit as ’n manier om hom te onthou.”

Clay bestudeer die vrou oorkant hom. Hy het geen verklaring vir die band wat hy met haar ervaar nie. Dit pla hom nie dat sy haar oorlede man steeds liefhet nie. Hierdie vrou is onwrikbaar lojaal. En nadat sy iemand ’n leeftyd liefgehad het – natuurlik het sy nog gevoelens vir hom. Sy sal altyd hê.

Die kelner kom met hulle toebroodjies en drinkgoed. Toe hy weg is, ontmoet Clay haar oë. “Kan ek vir ons bid?”

Sy knik en laat sak haar kop.

“Here, ons dank U vir hierdie kos, maar bo alles dank ons U dat U ons vanoggend bymekaar uitgebring het. U het ons albei se gebede verhoor. Myne dat ek ’n verskil wou maak, en Jamie s’n. Al die eer behoort aan U, Vader, en ons dank U daarvoor. Amen.”

“Amen.” Sy glimlag toe sy opkyk en hy kry die gevoel dat sy nie verder oor haar man wil praat nie; nie nou nie, in elk geval. Sy gebruik haar mes om haar

toebroodjie in kwarte te sny. “Nou goed, Clay. Wat van jou? Is drie weke nie nogal lank om weg van die werk te wees nie?”

“Eintlik is dit vier.” Hy maak sy toebroodjie oop en strooi sout oor die hoendervulsel. Sy liggaam is ’n prioriteit en hy kyk mooi na homself, maar sout is een van sy min swakhede. Hy gebruik dit mildelik.

“Is jy hier vir vier weke?” Sy lyk verras. “Ek het gedink Joe sê die opleiding is drie weke.”

“Dit is.” Hy plaas die boonste sny terug op sy broodjie en kyk vir ’n paar oomblikke na haar. Sal haar opinie van hom verander as hy haar vertel wat gebeur het? Hy trek sy asem stadig in. Dit maak nie saak nie; hy kan nie anders as om eerlik met haar te wees nie. “Ek het ’n week verlof gehad voordat ek weg is.”

“Vakansie?” Sy het haar toebroodjie opgetel, maar nog nie ’n hap geneem nie. “Ek was in ’n skietvoorval. ’n Man het met ’n AK-47 op my gevuur.” Clay hou haar dop vir haar reaksie. “Ek moes hom skiet.”

Jamie se oë rek. “En toe word jy afgedank?”

“Nee.” Hy glimlag. Haar skok oor die skietery is nie so groot soos haar kommer dat hy sy werk verloor het nie. “Nee, dis standaardprosedure wanneer ’n verdagte tydens ’n misdaad deur ’n polisiebeampte doodgeskiet word. Dis betaalde verlof; daar word ’n ondersoek gedoen en dan word ’n verslag ingedien. Tensy daar onraad vermoed word, moet die polisiebeampte drie of vier weke later terugrapporteer.

“O. Ek het dit nie geweet nie.” Sy neem ’n hap van haar broodjie.

“My kaptein het gesê ek hoef nie bekommerd te wees nie. Ek kon niks anders gedoen het nie.” Hy oorweeg dit om vir haar te sê hoe amper hy self doodgeskiet is, maar die tyd voel nie reg nie. “Wanneer ek teruggaan, gaan hulle my speurder maak.” Hy glimlag. “Dis die lang antwoord op jou vraag. Ek’s hier omdat ek die opleiding nodig het, en Joe het New York gekies.”

“O.” Haar oë is vol begrip. Sy kelk haar hande om haar tee en bring dit na haar mond. “Oor Wanda.”

“Jip.”

Hulle gesels oor wat die opleiding alles behels en hoe lank hy al in die polisie is voordat die gesprek weer na die mans op die veerboot terugkeer.

“Het jy regtig ’n pistool gesien?” Sy kantel haar kop effens en kyk ongelowig na hom. “Jy was aan die ander kant van die dek.”

Hy grinnik. Sy’s opmerkzaam. “Ek het gesien dat die ou na jou toe loop, en ek kon aan jou gesig sien dat jy hom nie ken nie. Ek het vir Joe gewys en ons het die situasie dopgehou. Toe die tweede ou opstaan en teen jou gaan sit, was die uitdrukking op jou gesig duidelik selfs van waar ons gesit het.

“Ek was doodsbenuud.”

“Ja.” Sy hand jeuk om hare vas te hou, maar dis buite die kwessie. Hy klem sy hande saam. “Ek kon dit sien. Toe het die tweede ou iets in jou ribbes gedruk en jy het gewip. Ek het vir Joe gevra of hy ’n pistool gesien het, en toe sê hy: ‘Ek is doodseker ek het.’ Toe sê ek: ‘Wel, dan beter ek dit by hom gaan kry.’



En Joe sê: ‘Ek kom saam.’”

Jamie giggel en neem ’n sluk van haar tee. “Maar julle het die pistool nooit regtig gesien nie?”

“Kom ek stel dit so: Dit het *gevoel* of ons het.”

“En op die ou end was julle gevoel reg,” speel Jamie saam, ’n glimlag op haar gesig.

Hy drink haar vir ’n oomblik in. “Dis die laaste tyd nogal geneig om reg te wees.”

Hy kan aan haar oë sien dat sy verstaan wat hy sê. Daar verskyn ’n sagte blos op haar wange. “Clay?”

*“Ja, Jamie.” Here ... ek wil haar weer sien. Moenie dat dit die laaste keer wees nie.*

“Kan ek jou weer sien? Terwyl jy hier is?” Haar vingers bewe, al probeer sy hulle om haar koppie stilhou.

Clay is nie seker of hy moet lag of weer moet kyk of hy ’n engel sien nie. Die antwoorde kom nou soos reën. Hy gaan haar nie van sy gebed vertel nie. Dit kan later kom. Hy wil haar in elk geval nie laat dink dat hy haar vraag ligtelik opneem nie. Teen die agtergrond van wat sy hom van haar man vertel het, moes dit vir haar moeilik gewees het om te vra. Hy knik. “Ek sal graag wil.”

“Julle bly op Staten Island, nè?”

“Ja. Die hotelle daar is goedkoper, of so het ek gehoor.”

“Baie goedkoper.” Die senuweeagtigheid – wat dit ook al is – vervaag. Sy glimlag weer met die gemoedelikheid waarmee sy op die veerboot en in St. Paul’s vir hom geglimlag het. “Kan ek jou en Joe vir ete nooi?”

Clay se hart sweef. Hy knik sonder om sy oë uit hare weg te neem. “Dit sal heerlik wees.”

Jamie moet haar dogtertjie op Staten Island gaan oplaai; dus eet hulle klaar en neem elkeen ’n taxi – hy na die polisiekantoor waar die oriënteringssessie aangebied word, sy na Battery Park toe. Hy weerstaan die begeerte om haar ’n drukkie te gee. Sy is nie meer ’n slagoffer wat vasgehou moet word nie. Sy is ’n vrou wat sy gedagtes en verbeelding in die loop van ’n oggend aangegryp het.

Dalk selfs sy hart.

Is dit haar weerloosheid of die manier waarop sy tot in sy hart kyk? *Bedaar, Michaels. Nie so vinnig nie.* Hy dwing sy gedagtes na Joe. Hoe het dit met hom en Wanda gegaan? Kon Joe daarin slaag om Wanda om verskoning te vra soos hy beplan het, of is sy steeds kwaad vir hom?

Hy probeer hom hulle ontmoeting indink, maar in plaas daarvan sien hy Jamie se gesig, hoe sy gelyk het toe sy op die veerboot verby hom geloop het, haar angstige oë toe die jong mans haar aangehou het, en hoe dit gevoel het om haar in die kaptein se kantoor in sy arms te neem ...

Die tonele bly oor en oor voor hom afspeel. Toe die taxi hom by die polisiekantoor aflaai, neem hy twee baie groot gedagtes met hom saam. Eerstens, hierdie nuwe vriendskap sal stadig moet ontwikkel.

En tweedens, hoeveel ure daar is voordat hy haar weer gaan sien.

# Chapter FOURTEEN

By the time Jamie put the casserole into the oven, she was so nervous her throat was dry.

She stared at the dial above the glass door. Was she supposed to set it at three-hundred-fifty degrees? Or was it four-fifty? She gritted her teeth. *Focus, Jamie...come on.* She turned back to the counter and the recipe still lying there. Her enchilada casserole was something she could make in her sleep. So why couldn't she remember how high to heat the oven? She scanned through the list of ingredients and finally found it on the back side. Three-fifty. Of course.

Four times that day she'd picked up the phone to cancel the dinner.

There were a hundred reasons why she shouldn't have Clay and Joe over. It was too soon. Her entire house was a shrine to Jake. The buffet table in the dining room still had the same six photos—pictures of him and Sierra, him and Jamie, the three of them at the beach, him in his uniform the day he was hired by the FDNY.

And then there was the bigger framed photo taken on their wedding day.

She would keep those pictures forever, but she didn't want Clay and Joe looking at them. Didn't want their pity. Poor firefighter's widow, still stuck in the past. The fact was, until the past two weeks the thought of other men hadn't crossed her mind. Sure, several FDNY widows had remarried, and she knew others who had started dating.

But her? Jamie Bryan?

The idea was laughable. No one could fill the place in her heart but Jake. No one. She felt scared and sick and guilty just thinking about starting over with someone new. But then, Aaron brought up the question, opened the door to possibilities she hadn't wanted to consider before.

And now...

There was no denying the way she felt with Clay. She'd relived the

moment on the ferryboat at least once an hour in the past twentyfour. How he'd taken charge of the scene and kept her safe, his body shielding hers. Things she hadn't been conscious of at the time were now vivid in her memory. The pungent fragrance of his leather jacket, his fresh-showered soap smell mixed with a subtle cologne. How she had inched closer to him, wanting his protection, his closeness.

It was crazy.

She hadn't asked for these feelings or looked for them or ever even imagined them. She'd only felt them for one other man in all her life. And now, in just a day's time, she was willing to serve Clay dinner in the house where she and Jake had built their life together?

It was all wrong.

Still...every time she picked up the phone to make the call, she stopped herself. She couldn't go back on her offer. It wasn't polite, for one thing, and the men *did* save her life, after all. Clay picked up the lunch tab. The least she could do was make dinner for them—a home-cooked meal, something they wouldn't be getting much of in the next three weeks. She would make good on her invitation because it was a nice thing to do, a Christian thing.

Unfortunately, as soon as she told herself that, the truth screamed at her so loud she couldn't think: her dinner offer had nothing to do with Christian goodwill.

She wanted to see Clay again.

It was that simple. He was all she'd thought of since their first meeting, no matter how wrong that might've been. That truth ran wild through her heart for a few hours until she walked across the house and picked up the phone, determined to cancel.

Then the whole goodwill thing came back around again.

The cycle was driving her crazy. Finally she stopped fighting herself. Yes, she was attracted to him. So what? Jake was dead; it wasn't a crime to have a nice-looking man over for dinner. He would be gone in three weeks,

back to California. What harm could come from a single dinner together?

She looked at the clock on the kitchen wall.

They'd be there in half an hour.

"Sierra?" She wiped her hands on her jeans and ran lightly to the base of the stairs. "Did you finish your homework?"

"Yes, Mommy. I was just playing with Wrinkles." Jamie heard her daughter's small feet padding toward the top of the stairs. "Can you play too? We're playing house and we need a mommy."

Jamie smiled. Sierra always put everything into perspective. "Okay, baby. I'll be up there in a few minutes."

"Good! I'll go tell Wrinkles."

"Okay." Jamie turned and gave the house a critical glance. What needed last minute touch-ups? She took quick steps into the dining room. The table was set, Sierra had put the vase of silk roses in the middle, and—

Jamie looked at the buffet table. She hadn't done anything with the pictures of Jake. They would stay, of course. But tonight? Both men would pity her for sure, pity her and think her delusional, trapped in a life lived more back in yesterday than today. She moved to the buffet.

The pictures were dusty, and that shot another arrow of guilt through her. How long had it been since she dusted them, since she'd come this close and actually looked at them? She picked up the one of Jake in his uniform and went to dust it with her shirt, but stopped herself.

She had on a new sweater—a ribbed pale blue pullover. Dust would show on it for sure.

The buffet had extra linens, didn't it? She opened the top drawer and pulled out an old cloth napkin, wrinkled from lack of use. Jake's pictures shouldn't get dusty. She ran the napkin over the glass until she could see his smile, the pride in his eyes, as easily as if she was taking the picture all over again.

The dust fell to the floor. She started to shove the napkin back in the drawer when an idea hit her. It wasn't that she wanted to hide his pictures.

Rather she wanted to protect them from the curious looks and silent questions that were bound to come if she left them up. The drawer was deep enough for all of them. She swallowed back a tidal wave of guilt and one at a time she dusted the pictures and layered them in the drawer with more cloth napkins.

There. She shut the drawer and dusted off her hands. As she did a picture came to mind. Pontius Pilot, rubbing his hands together, convincing himself he wasn't guilty when he clearly was.

Just like her.

Here she was, hiding Jake's pictures, burying her past in a buffet drawer and then dusting off her hands, as if that could make her innocent.

She stared hard at the closed buffet drawer, willing herself to see through the wood at the pictures laying there, put away like so many outdated knickknacks.

"Jamie," she whispered out loud, "you're losin' it."

If only Jake had stayed home that day, gone with her and Sierra to the zoo. If he hadn't gone in that Tuesday morning they would have other, newer pictures on the buffet, and dinner would be for Jake and Sierra. Not two strangers she'd met just the day before.

*Jake...it's so hard. I don't want to live without you, but...I keep waking up. Life keeps coming whether I like it or not.* She gripped the edge of the buffet and closed her eyes. *God...am I bad? Should I keep the photos up? Help me...*

No holy words came to her, no Scripture verse. But after a few seconds, a calm settled over her. She could put the photos away for a night if she wanted to. If it helped her take one step toward tomorrow then it was the most right thing she could do. She opened her eyes.

She wouldn't be able to think straight if she had to get through the night with Jake's eyes on her the whole time. With hers on him.

"Mommy?" Her daughter's voice came from the upstairs bed-room. She sounded frustrated.

Jamie gave one last look and then turned her back on the buffet.  
“Coming.”

What was the big deal, anyway? It was one dinner, one simple dinner for two police officers far from home. She could do this one thing, show them some East Coast hospitality and be done with it. She darted up the stairs and stopped at the top.

She'd forgotten perfume.

“One sec, Sierra.” More quick steps, through her bedroom, to the bureau near the end of her bed. She grabbed the amber bottle and gave first her neck, then both wrists a quick spray.

When she walked into Sierra's bedroom, her daughter sat up straight and studied her. “How come you're dressed up?”

“I'm not.” Jamie dropped cross-legged on the floor across from Sierra and Wrinkles. The cat had a pink scarf tied around his head and white lace socks on his front paws. His look was one of attempted dignity and mild disgust. “Wrinkles is the one who's dressed up.”

Sierra grinned at the cat. “She's my big sister.”

“I see.” Jamie loved her daughter's imagination. That she could dress up a tomcat and convince herself he was her sister was testimony to the delightful reaches of her creativity. For the occasion, Sierra wore a blue velvet hat and long white gloves.

“You be the mommy, okay?” Sierra bounced up and grabbed an old straw hat with loud purple plastic flowers glued to the sides. It was her favorite dress-up hat for Jamie. “Here, this is for you.”

The hat was big and obnoxious; it flopped over Jamie's ears, but she didn't mind. The game was a welcome distraction. “Well?” She held her arms straight out. “How do I look?”

“Fabulous.” Sierra giggled. “Isn't she fabulous, Wrinkles?”

Jamie petted the cat. “Wrinkles is speechless, I think.”

The cat started to get up, but Sierra stopped him. She cooed near the cat's face. “It's okay, Wrinkles, he isn't the only pretty girl in the family,

actually.” She looked at Jamie. “Wrinkles is jealous because he doesn’t have a pretty dress.”

“Tell Wrinkles it’s okay. I don’t have a pretty dress either.”

Sierra blinked and her eyes grew serious. “Wait, Mommy. Who’s coming for dinner again?”

“Two police officers. I met them on the ferry yesterday, going to my volunteer work.”

“Oh.” She kept one hand on the cat’s back. “Were they hungry?”

“The police officers?”

“Yes. You invited them for dinner so they musta been hungry.”

“No.” She hid her smile behind her fingers. “I mean, not at the time, they weren’t hungry. I hope they’re hungry tonight, though.” Jamie studied her daughter. “Actually, they saved me from some bad men.”

Sierra opened her eyes wide. “Bad men? Like with guns?”

“Yes.” Jamie adjusted her hat. “Three bad men tried to scare me.” She wanted to keep the story simple. “And before they could make me too scared, the officers came and took them away.”

“Wow.” Sierra adjusted Wrinkles’s scarf so that it came down closer to his eyes. “He looks more like a girl now.”

Jamie studied the cat. “Yes, you’re right.”

“So they took the bad guys away and then you asked them to dinner?” Sierra kept one hand on the cat’s head. In case he had any ideas about ending the game prematurely, Jamie guessed.

“Well, no. I talked to them for a while. They’re both very nice.”

“What’s their names?”

“One man is Clay...” Jamie felt her heart skip a beat. What if Sierra could see through her? What if she could tell the minute the men arrived that Jamie had feelings for Clay? “The other man is Joe. They’re from California.”

“Oh.” One of the socks was slipping off Wrinkles’s paw. She pulled it back on. “So they didn’t know Daddy?”



It took Jamie a moment to catch her breath. “No, sweetie. Why would they know Daddy?”

“You said they’re policemen. Sometimes policemen and firefighters know each other.” She patted Wrinkles’s head. “Didn’t you know that, Mommy?”

“Yes, I guess I did.” She never stopped being amazed by the things Sierra said. “But these two men don’t know Daddy, okay?” Jamie pointed at Wrinkles. “Now listen, daughter. Where have you been, out so late and dressed like that?”

Sierra giggled. “Mommy, don’t be mad at us. We had dancing lessons with our boyfriends.”

“Boyfriends?” Jamie used her best mock mean mother tone. “No boyfriends for you! Besides, where are the boyfriends?”

The wheels in Sierra’s head must’ve been turning. She looked around the room and in a rush she pointed at the closet. “There. We keep our boyfriends in the closet.”

Again Jamie had to stifle a laugh. She sat a bit straighter, more authoritative. “There will be no more boyfriends in closets anymore.”

The cat tried to pull away, but Sierra stopped him again. He settled back down and meowed.

Jamie pointed a finger at him. “No talking back, sister. And don’t try to run away, either.”

The doorbell rang. They were here! Certain moments since yesterday Jamie was sure she’d dreamed the whole thing up. Men couldn’t have tried to accost her on the ferry in broad daylight, and certainly two police officers didn’t happen to be watching. She hadn’t spent the morning with a man who had mesmerized her from the first few seconds, and she didn’t have lunch with him, talking with him like they were old friends. And she certainly didn’t invite them for dinner.

But she really did. The whole day really happened, and now Joe and Clay were downstairs waiting to be let in.

She jumped into action. "Come on, Sierra, let's go meet them."

Sierra swept the cat into her arms and the two of them bounded down the stairs to the front door. Jamie shot Sierra a look. "Best manners, okay?"

"Okay." Sierra held the cat to her chest. "Best manners."

Jamie opened the door and found Clay on her porch. He held something behind his back. "Hi." Warmth stirred inside her at the sight of him, and she felt her cheeks get hot. Sierra came up beside her, still holding the cat, and suddenly Jamie remembered what she was doing. She put her arm around her daughter. "Come in."

"I don't know." Laughter danced in Clay's eyes. He looked himself up and down. "Looks like I'm underdressed."

Jamie gasped and grabbed the hat from her head. "We were playing —"

The laughter came all at once, and after a day of worrying and overthinking, it felt too good to stop it. Dress-up games were normal fare for Jamie and Sierra. But how must they have looked? Sierra with her old-lady blue velvet hat and white gloves; her with the cheap plastic flowers? And what about Wrinkles?

She was laughing too hard to say anything. Instead she backed into the house, gesturing for him to join them.

Sierra apparently didn't see anything funny. She gave Jamie a strange look and then turned to Clay. "Mommy's silly sometimes."

Jamie let out another burst of laughter.

"Yes." Clay stooped down to Sierra's level. "I see that." He petted the cat's chin. "I'm Clay."

"I'm Sierra." She smiled at him, not quite smitten, but close.

Clay winked at her. "You have nice taste in outfits, Sierra."

"Thank you." She was still in character, assuming it perfectly normal for a cat to have a scarf and lace socks. But she did a little giggle and spoke in a loud whisper, as if she were sharing secret information. "We're playing pretend."

Jamie had tears in her eyes. Still laughing, she leaned against the foyer wall so she could catch her breath.

Clay's eyes widened. "Oh, I see." He gave Jamie a quick smile. "She must be the crazy neighbor lady?"

Sierra giggled. "No, she's the mom."

"Are you the princess?"

"No, I'm the little sister." She held Wrinkles up and one of the socks slid off his paw onto the floor. "Wrinkles is the big sister."

"I see."

Jamie sucked in two quick breaths and dabbed the corners of her eyes. Sierra held Clay's attention, so she took the moment to study him. He wore a tan sweater, khaki dress pants, and the leather jacket. His hair was short, cut conservatively in a way that complimented his face.

He looked at her. "I don't know, Jamie. I kind of liked the hat." Another giggle worked its way up, but she held back. She was on the verge of being rude as it was. She exhaled hard. "Whew! I'm sorry." She lifted her shoulders and gave him a grin. "What a bad hostess I am." Jamie drew another breath and fanned her face. "Welcome to our home. We're a little loony, but we have fun."

"I like it." His eyes were full of teasing. "But under the circumstances, I think I need a hat."

Sierra's eyes lit up. "I'll get you one!" She started to run off, and the motion frightened the cat. He jumped from her arms, losing the other sock and causing the scarf to slide down around his neck.

"Wrinkles!"

The cat was off and around the corner before Sierra could stop him. She watched him for a minute and then she shrugged. "I'll be right back."

"Wait, Sierra." Clay straightened. He was still hiding something.

Sierra pulled her gloves up a little higher and turned around. "I can get you one, really. I have a whole box."

"Okay." He gave her a kind smile. "First I have something for you."

Jamie watched from her place against the wall. Her heart swelled as she took in the scene. In all the time they'd known Aaron, he'd never brought Sierra a present.

Sierra came and stood in front of Clay. "Really?"

"Yep." He pulled a pink bag out from behind his back. "Here. This is for letting me come over for dinner."

"Wow!" She took the tissue paper from the top and gasped. "It's Nala!"

Nala? Jamie blinked, stunned. Nala was the girlfriend of Simba in *The Lion King*. Jamie met Clay's eyes and caught his knowing look. The gift wasn't an accident. He had remembered their conversation at lunch, remembered that Sierra's favorite movie was *The Lion King*.

With great care Sierra pulled a honey-colored stuffed lion from the bag. She turned to Jamie and held it up. "Look, Mom! She's perfect! Next time, *she* can be the big sister!"

"I'm sure Wrinkles will be glad to share the scarf."

"Yeah, I'm sure too." She stared at Clay, awed. "Thanks very much." She gave him a quick hug and then ran to Jamie. "She's super soft, Mommy, look!"

Sierra gushed about Nala for another few minutes before running off to find a beat-up hat for Clay. The conversation shifted to their orientation and Clay's expectations for the three weeks of training.

"I'll go home a better detective." They moved into the kitchen. "Joe'll see to that."

"Isn't he coming?" The silliness at the front door made her forget about his partner. She grabbed an old pair of pot holders, opened the oven door, and pulled the casserole out. The cheese on top was barely golden brown.

Clay looked over her shoulder at the dinner. "Whatever that is, I'll take two." He helped clear a spot on the counter. "Smells delicious."

"It's a family favorite." A memory flashed in Jamie's mind—the first

time she'd made the casserole for Jake in the days after they were married. She'd burned the cheese and mixed the sauce wrong. They couldn't eat it, but it gave them something to laugh about for days afterwards. She blinked and the images were gone. "So what about Joe?"

"Wanda invited him to her place." He leaned against the counter and crossed his arms, watching her.

Jamie took the milk from the refrigerator and poured Sierra a glass. "Things must've gone well."

"I guess." Clay made a slight frown. "Joe felt awkward; he couldn't find the right time to tell her he was sorry." He unfolded his arms and rested the palms of his hands on the counter behind him. "I guess she sent her kids to the neighbor's house for the night yesterday. Joe thought it was sort of strange."

"They both have a lot to work through." Jamie took the casserole to the table.

Clay followed behind with the salad and milk. "Definitely."

They heard Sierra before they saw her. She raced around the corner, a jester hat in one hand, the oversized hat with the purple plastic flowers in the other. On her head, the older velvet hat had been replaced with a sailor's cap. Sierra collected hats for her dressup box, and these were three of her favorites. "Hi, guys!" Her cheerful voice struck Jamie. Sierra was a happy child. More subdued, maybe, than before the terrorist attacks. But happy all the same. But now—for whatever reason—she was practically bubbling over with enthusiasm, her eyes dancing with a joy that Jamie hadn't seen in years.

"Here, Clay." She handed him the jester hat. "I think you're right. Let's wear hats for dinner."

Jamie was about to tell her no, but Clay took the hat and adjusted it on his head. "Whaddaya think, Jamie. Would I scare off the bad guys with this?"

She had to bite her lip to stop another wave of laughter. She looked at

Sierra and angled her head. “Honey, I’m not sure our guest wants to spend dinner wearing a jester hat.”

“Actually—” Clay lifted his chin with mock dignity—“I’m quite fond of jester hats.”

Sierra clapped her hands. “Yeah, Mommy. This’ll be the funnest dinner in forever.” She put the sailor’s hat on her own head and handed the one with the plastic flowers to Jamie. “Please, Mommy. Wear it, please.”

“She’ll wear it.” Clay stooped down some, so he was more on Sierra’s level. “Hats are required at this dinner.”

“Fine.” Jamie rolled her eyes. “Give me the hat.”

Clay took it from Sierra, stood up, and placed it on Jamie’s head. “You look pretty in purple.”

“Thank you.” Jamie’s knees felt shaky, her stomach warm from the effects of her melting heart. Not since Jake had anyone told her she looked pretty. She gathered herself and looked at Sierra. “All washed up?”

“Yep.” Sierra sat down at the table and folded her hands.

Jamie sat beside her and Clay across from them. His jester hat flopped to one side as he held his hands out. “Can I pray?”

“Yes.” The warmth moved up to her cheeks, and she smiled. He looked silly, but his voice, his eyes, were as deep, as vulnerable as they’d been the day before. She took Clay’s hand and watched Sierra take the other.

They bowed their heads and Clay began. “God, thank You for this food—” he gave Jamie’s fingers a gentle squeeze—“and the hands that prepared it. And thank You for new friends. In Jesus’ name, amen.”

Throughout the meal, Jamie expected to be nervous, unsure of how to carry on a conversation with a man she’d only just met. She was sure she’d be distracted, guilty at having moved Jake’s picture. Instead, the meal flew by, and all she could think about was how wonderful she felt. Having Clay there, his hand in hers during the prayer, his presence at their table. All of it felt impossibly good, right in a way she couldn’t begin to understand.

During the meal, Jamie caught him looking at her, glancing away from Sierra and finding her eyes, almost as if he wanted to see for himself that the attraction or chemistry or whatever they shared was still there.

It was. Jamie used her eyes to tell him so. He'd been dropped into her life and nothing had been the same. She hadn't had time to analyze how or why God had brought them together, just that He had. Only one thought threatened to mar the night. It wasn't of Jake or his picture or how she would get on with life without him.

Rather it was what would happen to her in three weeks—when Clay went home.

Sierra felt it in her heart the minute she pulled Nala from the gift bag. Clay liked her. Because how else did he know about Nala? Nala was the coolest present ever, and it wasn't even her birthday. All her friends had Lion King, but not Nala. Plus Nala was a girl, which meant she could wear hats and scarves and fancy socks and bows in her hair and play the big sister.

Without getting mad, the way Wrinkles sometimes did.

Clay wasn't a regular kind of grown-up like Captain Hisel. Captain Hisel would smile at her and pat her head, and sometimes he'd talk to her for as long as a TV commercial. But he didn't really like her because he never asked her questions.

Sierra was counting. While they ate dinner Clay asked her eight questions, like who was her teacher and how many kids were in her class and who were her bestest friends and what did she want for Christmas?

By the end of dinner, Sierra was having a secret thought. Secret thought was when she had an idea in her head but she didn't share it with anyone else. Not even Mommy. Her secret thought was this: Since the other second daddy had to go back to his real family, maybe Clay would make a good second daddy.

She spied on him when he wasn't watching, and her heart had a sense

about him. A sense that he acted sort of like a daddy, actually. He smiled big and wore his jester hat all night. Also, after dinner he played Uno with her and her mommy. The three of them laughed a lot, and Sierra didn't even care who won.

When Clay left, he stooped down and told her to have fun with Nala. Then he gave Mommy a short hug, sort of like when Captain Hisel came over.

Before he left, Clay looked at her one last time and winked. And Sierra did a little gasp because that's something she'd seen before. Maybe it was her daddy who used to do that, or her second daddy—the one who lived with her after the Twin Towers fell down. But instead of feeling confused, her heart felt happy. Because maybe the wink was a sign that God knew how lonely she was without her daddy.

And maybe God would take away the lonely forever.

## **Veertien**

Teen die tyd dat Jamie die kasserol in die oond druk, is haar keel kurkdroog van senuweeagtigheid.

Sy kyk na die oondwyser bokant die glasdeur. Is sy veronderstel om die oond op honderd-en-tagtig grade te stel? Of is dit tweehonderd-en-twintig? Sy byt op haar tande. *Fokus, Jamie ... kom nou.* Sy draai weer na die toonbank waar sy die resep neergesit het. Haar enchilada-kasserol is iets wat sy in haar slaap kan maak. Vir wat kan sy skielik nie onthou hoe warm die oond moet wees nie? Haar oë beweeg oor die lys bestanddele en kry dit uiteindelik agterop die bladsy. Honderd-en-tagtig. Natuurlik.

Sy het die telefoon al vier keer vandag opgetel om die ete te kanselleer.

Daar is honderd redes waarom dit nie 'n goeie idee is om Clay en Joe oor te nooi nie. Dis te gou. Haar huis is as't ware 'n heiligdom vir Jake. Dieselfde ses foto's staan steeds op die buffet in die eetkamer – foto's van hom en Sierra, van Jake en Jamie, hulle drie op die strand, Jake in sy uniform die dag toe hy deur die New Yorkse brandweer in diens geneem is.

En dan is daar die groter geraamde foto wat op hulle troudag geneem is.

Sy sal daardie foto's vir altyd hou, maar sy wil nie hê Clay en Joe moet daarna kyk nie. Wil nie hê hulle moet haar bejammer nie. Die arme brandweer-weduwee, steeds vasgevang in die verlede. Die feit is, tot en met 'n paar weke gelede het die gedagte aan 'n ander man nooit eens by haar



opgekom nie. Dit is so, sommige van die weduwees het weer getrou, en sy ken 'n paar wat weer begin uitgaan het.

Maar sy? Jamie Bryan?

Dis lagwekkend. Niemand kan Jake se plek in haar hart inneem nie. Niemand nie. Die blote gedagte aan 'n nuwe begin saam met iemand anders laat haar bang en siek en skuldig voel. Maar Aaron het die kwessie aangeraak, en sy moes moontlikhede begin oorweeg waaraan sy vroeër nie eens wou dink nie.

En nou ...

Sy kan nie ontken hoe sy by Clay voel nie. Sy het die oomblik op die veerboot die afgelope vier-en-twintig uur ten minste een maal per uur herleef. Hoe hy van die situasie beheer geneem het en haar lewe gered het, tussen haar en die aanvallers inbeweeg het. Dinge waarvan sy in daardie oomblikke nie bewus was nie, is nou helder in haar gedagtes. Die geur van sy leerbaadjie, sy subtiële naskeermiddel. Hoe sy nader aan hom beweeg het om sy beskerming, sy nabyheid te ervaar.

Dis malligheid.

Sy het nie gevra of gesoek om so te voel nie. Sy kon haar dit nie eens voorstel nie. Sy het in haar hele lewe nog net teenoor een man so gevoel. En nou is sy bereid om Clay te ontvang in die huis waar sy en Jake hulle lewe gedeel het?

Dit voel net nie reg nie.

En tog ... sy kon haarself net nie sover bring om die oproep te maak nie. Sy kan nie haar uitnodiging terugtrek nie. In die eerste plek sal dit onbeskof wees, en die mans hét per slot van rekening haar lewe gered. Clay het vir middagete betaal. Die minste wat sy kan doen, is om 'n ete vir hulle voor te sit. Hulle gaan die volgende drie weke nie gou weer 'n 'n tuisgemaakte ete geniet nie. Sy sal haar uitnodiging nakom omdat dit die regte ding is om te doen, haar Christelike plig.

Maar sodra sy haar dit begin wysmaak, protesteer die waarheid so hard dat sy nie haarself kan hoor dink nie: Haar ete-uitnodiging het niks met Christelike plig te doen nie.

Sy wil weer vir Clay sien.

Dis so eenvoudig soos dit. Sedert hulle eerste ontmoeting kon sy aan niks of niemand anders dink nie, maak nie saak hoe verkeerd dit voel nie. Daardie besef het haar telkens 'n paar uur bloots gery totdat sy die telefoon sou optel, vasberade om te kanselleer.

Dan het die hele naasteliefde-kwessie weer teruggekom.

Die siklus het haar teen die mure uitgedryf. Uiteindelik het sy ophou baklei. Ja, sy voel aangetrokke tot hom. Wat daarvan? Jake is dood; dis nie 'n misdaad om 'n aantreklike man vir ete te nooi nie. Hy sal oor drie weke weer weg wees, terug in Kalifornië. 'n Ete kan tog nie kwaad doen nie.

Sy kyk na die horlosie teen die kombuismuur.

Hulle sal oor 'n halfuur hier wees.

“Sierra?” Sy vee haar hande aan haar jeans af en draf ligvoets na die onderpunt van die trap. “Is jy klaar met jou huiswerk?”

“Ja, Mamma. Ek en Wrinkles speel ’n bietjie.” Jamie hoor haar dogtertjie se voetstappe in die boonste gang. “Wil Mamma ook kom speel? Ons speel huis-huis en ons het ’n mamma nodig.”

Jamie glimlag. Sierra plaas altyd alles vir haar in perspektief. “Oukei, my skat. Ek’s nou daar.”

“Moenie lank vat nie, Mamma! Ek sal solank vir Wrinkles gaan sê.”

“Oukei.” Jamie draai om en kyk met ’n kritiese oog na die huis. Is daar nog iets wat reggeskuif moet word? Sy loop na die eetkamer toe. Die tafel is gedek en Sierra het die vaas met syrose in die middel gesit, en ...

Jamie kyk na die buffet waar Jake se foto’s uitgestal word. Sy het nog nooit daaraan gedink om hulle te skuif nie. Maar vanaand? Die twee mans sal haar vanselfsprekend bejammer en dink dat sy in ’n waan lewe, vasgevang in die verlede. Sy loop na die buffettafel toe.

Die foto’s is stowwerig en dit laat haar van voor af skuldig voel. Wanneer laas het sy dit afgestof, het sy hier kom staan en daarna gekyk? Sy tel die een op van Jake in sy uniform en begin dit met haar hemp afstof, maar bedink haar.

Sy dra ’n nuwe toppie – ’n ligblou oortrektrui. Die stof sal definitief wys.

Daar moet ekstra servette in die buffettafel wees. Sy trek die boonste laai oop en haal ’n ou, verkreukelde lapservet uit. Jake se foto’s mag nie stowwerig wees nie. Sy vryf die glas totdat Jake se glimlag en die trotse kyk in sy oë lyk asof sy die foto gister geneem het.

Sy begin die servet in die laai bêre toe sy op die idee kom. Dis nie asof sy sy foto’s wil wegsteek nie. Sy wil hulle teen die nuuskierige kyke en verswygde vrae beskerm wat hulle sal uitlok. Die laai is diep genoeg vir almal van hulle. Sy onderdruk die ongevraagde skuldgevoel en begin die foto’s een-een afstof en in die laai bêre.

Daar. Sy maak die laai toe en stof haar hande af. Dit laat haar dadelik aan iets dink. Pontius Pilatus wat sy hande gewas het om homself teen sy beterwete in te probeer oortuig dat hy onskuldig was.

Nes sy.

Hier is sy besig om Jake se foto’s weg te steek, haar verlede in ’n buffetlaai te bêre en haar hande af te stof asof dit haar onskuldig kan maak.

“Jamie,” fluister sy hardop, “jy is besig om kop te verloor.”

As Jake daardie dag maar net tuisgebly en saam met haar en Sierra dieretuin toe gegaan het. As hy daardie Dinsdagoggend nie gaan werk het nie, sou hulle ander, meer onlangse foto’s op die buffet gehad het en sou sy vir Jake en Sierra kos gemaak het. Nie twee vreemdelinge wat sy pas eers die vorige dag ontmoet het nie.

*Jake ... dis so swaar. Ek wil nie sonder jou lewe nie, maar ... ek bly soggens wakker word. Die lewe bly kom, of ek daarvan hou of nie. Sy hou aan die rand van die buffet vas en maak haar oë toe. Here ... is ek ’n slegte mens? Moet ek die foto’s weer uithaal? Help my ....*

Sy hoor niks nie, ervaar niks nie. Maar na ’n paar sekondes is dit asof ’n vrede oor haar kom. Sy kan die foto’s wegsit vir vanaand as sy wil. As dit haar sal

help om een tree nader aan môre te gee, is dit trouens die beste wat sy kan doen. Sy maak haar oë oop.

Sy sal nie helder kan dink as Jake se oë die hele aand op haar rus nie. Of hare op hom nie.

“Mamma?” Haar dogtertjie se stem kom bo uit haar kamer. Sy klink gefrustreerd.

Jamie kyk ’n laaste keer na die buffet en draai om. “Ek kom.”

Hoekom nie? Dis een ete, een eenvoudige ete vir twee polisiemanne in ’n vreemde stad. Sy kan hulle hierdie een keer ’n bietjie New Yorkse gasvryheid bewys en klaarkry. Sy draf op met die trappies en steek vas toe sy bo kom.

Sy het parfuum vergeet.

“Net ’n oomblik, Sierra.” Sy haas haar na haar kamer en tot by die kassie langs haar bed. Sy gryp die amberkleurige botteltjie en spuit daarvan aan haar nek en polse.

Toe sy by Sierra se kamer inloop, sit haar dogtertjie regop en kyk ondersoekend na haar. “Hoekom lyk Mamma so mooi?”

“Ek lyk doodgewoon.” Jamie gaan sit kruisbeen op die vloer oorkant Sierra en Wrinkles. Die kat het ’n pienk serp om sy kop en wit kantsokkies aan sy voorpote. Sy uitdrukking is iets tussen gepoogde waardigheid en ligte afkeer. “Wrinkles is die een wat mooi lyk.”

Sierra glimlag vir haar kat. “Sy’s my groot sussie.”

“Ek sien.” Jamie verkneukel haar in haar dogtertjie se verbeelding. Om ’n mannetjieskat uit te dos en haarself te oortuig dat hy haar sussie is, getuig van geweldige kreatiwiteit. Vir die geleentheid dra Sierra ’n blou fluweelhoed en lang, wit handskoene.

“Mamma sal die mamma wees, oukei?” Sierra spring op en gryp ’n ou strooihoed wat met helderpers plastieklomme versier is. Dis haar gunsteling-speel-speel-hoed vir Jamie. “Hier is Mamma s’n.”

Die hoed is groot en uitspattig; dit hang pap om Jamie se gesig, maar sy gee nie om nie. “En?” sy hou haar arms uit. “Hoe lyk ek?”

“Pragtig.” Sierra giggel. “Lyk sy nie pragtig nie, Wrinkles?”

Jamie vryf die kat. “Lyk my Wrinkles is heeltemal sprakeloos.”

Die kat begin opstaan, maar Sierra keer hom. Sy flikflooi naby die kat se gesig. “Dis oukei, Wrinkles, jy’s nie die enigste mooi meisie in die gesin nie.” Sy kyk na Jamie. “Wrinkles is jaloers omdat hy nie ’n mooi rok het nie.”

“Sê vir Wrinkles dis oukei. Ek het ook nie ’n mooi rok nie.”

Sierra knip haar oë en word dan ernstig. “Wag, Mamma. Wie kom nou weer hier eet?”

“Twee polisiemanne. Ek het hulle gister op die veerboot ontmoet toe ek gaan werk het.”

“O.” Sy hou haar hand op die kat se rug. “Was hulle honger?”

“Die polisiemanne?”

“Ja. Mamma het hulle vir ete genooi, so hulle was seker honger?”

“Nee.” Sy steek haar glimlag agter haar vingers weg. “Ek bedoel, hulle was

nie tóé honger nie. Maar kom ons hoop hulle is vanaand honger.” Jamie bestudeer haar dogtertjie. “Eintlik het hulle my gehelp toe slegte mense my wou seermaak.”

Sierra se oë rek. “Slegte mense? Met gewere?”

“Ja.” Jamie verskuif haar hoed. “Drie slegte mans het my probeer bang maak.” Sy wil die storie eenvoudig hou. “En voordat hulle my te bang kon maak, het die polisiemanne gekom en hulle weggevat.”

“Sjoe.” Sierra werskaf met Wrinkles se serp en trek dit laer oor sy oë. “Nou lyk hy meer soos ’n meisie.”

Jamie kyk na die kat. “Jy’s reg.”

“So toe vat hulle die slegte mense weg en toe vra Mamma of hulle hier wil kom eet?” Sierra hou haar een handjie op die kat se kop. Vir ingeval hy die speletjie vroegtydig wil verlaat, raai Jamie.

“Wel, nee. Ek het vir ’n rukkie met hulle gepraat. Hulle is al twee baie gaaf.”

“Wat is hulle name?”

“Die een man is oom Clay ...” Jamie se hart mis ’n slag. Sê nou Sierra sien deur haar? Sê nou sy sien vanuit die staanspoor dat Jamie gevoelens vir Clay het? “Die ander man is oom Joe. Hulle kom van Kalifornië af.”

“O.” Een van Wrinkles se sokkies begin afgly en Sierra trek dit op. “So hulle het nie vir Pappa geken nie?”

Dit neem Jamie ’n oomblik om haar asem terug te kry. “Nee, my skat. Hoekom sou hulle vir Pappa geken het?”

“Mamma sê hulle is polisiemanne. Partykeer ken polisiemanne en brandweermanne mekaar.” Sy vryf oor Wrinkles se kop. “Het Mamma nie geweet nie?”

“Ek het seker, ja.” Sy bly haar aan Sierra se sêgoed verstom. “Maar hierdie twee mans het nie vir Pappa geken nie.” Jamie wend haar tot Wrinkles. “Nou ja, jonge dame, waar kom jy so laat vandaan? En hoekom is jy so aangetrek?” Sierra giggel. “Moenie vir ons kwaad wees nie, Mamma. Ons het saam met ons kêrels gaan dans.”

“Julle kêrels?” Jamie praat in haar beste ma-stem. “Julle is te jonk vir kêrels! En waar is hierdie kêrels van julle nogal?”

Sierra dink vinnig. Sy kyk rond en wys dan haastig na die kas. “Daar. Ons kêrels bly in die kas.”

Jamie sluk haar lag. Sy sit ’n bietjie meer regop, haar houding gesaghebbend. “Van nou af wil ek nie weer enige kêrels in die kaste vang nie.”

Die kat probeer loskom, maar Sierra pen hom vas. Hy gee oor en miaau.

Jamie wys met ’n kwaai vinger na hom. “Ek wil jou nie hoor terugpraat nie, oukus. En moenie probeer weghardloop nie.”

Die voordeurklokkie lui. Hulle is hier! Sedert gister het Jamie af en toe gedink dat sy haar die hele situasie verbeel het. Is sy regtig op die veerboot deur drie mans aangehou en het twee polisiebeamptes wonderbaarlik tot haar redding gekom? Het sy die oggend saam met ’n man deurgebring wat haar van die eerste oomblik af bekoor het? Het sy saam met hom gaan eet en gesels asof

hulle ou vriende was? En het sy hulle regtig vir ete genooi?

Ja, sy het. Die hele dag het regtig gebeur en nou wag Joe en Clay op haar voorstoep.

Sy spring op. “Kom, Sierra. Kom ons gaan maak oop vir hulle.”

Sierra raap die kat in haar arms op en hulle draf by die trappies af. Jamie gee Sierra ’n kyk. “Beste maniere, oukei?”

“Oukei.” Sierra hou die kat teen haar bors vas. “Beste maniere.”

Jamie maak die deur oop en kyk in Clay vas. Hy hou iets agter sy rug vas. “Haai.” ’n Warm gevoel versprei deur haar en sy voel hoe haar wange rooi word. Sierra kom staan langs haar, Wrinkles steeds in haar arms, en skielik is dit asof Jamie weer tot haar sinne kom. Sy sit haar arm om haar dogtertjie. “Kom in.”

“Ek weet nie.” Clay se oë lag. Hy kyk homself op en af. “Lyk my ek het nie reg aangetrek vir die geleentheid nie.”

Jamie snak na haar asem en pluk die hoed van haar kop af. “Ons het gespeel ...”

Die lag oorweldig haar, en ná ’n dag se bekommernis en te veel dink, is dit salig om haar daaraan oor te gee. Fantasie-speletjies is normaal vir Jamie en Sierra. Maar hoe moet dit vir iemand anders lyk? Sierra met haar outydse blou fluweelhoed en wit handskoene; sy met die goedkoop plastieklomme? En wat van Wrinkles?

Sy lag so dat sy nie kan praat nie. Al wat sy kan doen, is om terug te staan en te wys dat hy moet inkom.

Sierra sien oënskynlik nie die humor daarin raak nie. Sy gee Jamie ’n snaakse kyk en draai dan na Clay. “Mamma is partykeer ’n bietjie laf.”

Die lag borrel van voor af uit Jamie se keel.

“Ja.” Hy hurk langs Sierra. “Ek sien so.” Hy kielie die kat onder sy ken. “Ek’s oom Clay.”

“Ek’s Sierra.” Haar glimlag verklap dat Clay haar reeds halfpad om sy pinkie gedraai het.

Clay knipoog vir haar. “Jy het goeie kleresmaak, Sierra.”

“Dankie.” Sy is steeds in karakter, en sien niks snaaks aan ’n kat met ’n pienk serp en kantsokkies nie. Maar sy gee ’n laggie en praat in ’n harde fluisterstem asof sy geheime inligting oordra. “Ons speel eintlik net.”

Jamie het trane in haar oë en sy leun uitasem gelag teen die muur in die portaal.

Clay se oë rek. “O, ek sien.” Hy glimlag vinnig in Jamie se rigting. “Sy is seker die buurvrou wat van haar trollie af is?”

Sierra giggel. “Nee, sy’s die ma.”

“Is jy die prinses?”

“Nee, ek’s die klein sussie.” Sy hou Wrinkles op en een van die sokkies gly af. “Wrinkles is die groot sussie.”

“Ek sien.”

Jamie skep asem en klad oor haar oë. Clay se aandag is by Sierra; dus gebruik

sy die oomblik om na hom te kyk. Hy dra 'n ligte hemp, netjiese kakiebroek en sy leerbaadjie. Sy kort hare is in 'n konserwatiewe styl gesny wat sy sterk gesig komplementeer.

Hy kyk na haar. “Ek weet nie, Jamie. Ek het nogal van die hoed gehou.”

Die lag wil weer kom, maar sy slaag daarin om dit te onderdruk. Soos dit is, grens haar gedrag aan ongeskiktheid. Sy blaas haar asem hard uit. “Sjoe! Ek’s jammer.” Sy haal haar skouers op en glimlag. “Ek’s ’n vreeslike gasvrou.” Jamie trek haar asem weer in en waai haarself koel. “Welkom by ons. Ons is ’n bietjie mallerig, maar ons het pret.”

“Ek hou daarvan.” Sy oë is vol tergliggies. “Maar onder die omstandighede dink ek ek kort ’n hoed.”

Sierra se oë verhelder. “Ek sal een gaan kry!” Sy swaai om en die kat skrik. Hy spring uit haar arms, verloor die ander kous en die pienk serp gly af.

“Wrinkles!”

Die kat is soos ’n pyl uit ’n boog en verdwyn om die hoek voordat Sierra hom kan keer. Sy kyk hom ’n oomblik agterna en trek dan haar skouers op. “Ek’s nou weer hier.”

“Wag, Sierra.” Clay staan op. Daar is steeds iets agter sy rug.

Sierra trek haar handskoene hoër op en draai om. “Ek kan regtig vir jou ene gaan haal. Ek het ’n hele boks.”

“Oukei.” Hy glimlag vir haar. “Maar eers het ek iets vir jou.”

Jamie hou hulle dop. Haar hart klop warm terwyl sy die toneel inneem. Vir solank sy Aaron ken, het hy nog nooit vir Sierra ’n geskenk gebring nie.

Sierra kom staan voor Clay. “Rêrig?”

“Jip.” Hy haal ’n pienk geskenksak agter sy rug uit. “Hier. Dis om dankie te sê dat ek vanaand hier kan kom eet.”

“Wow!” Sy haal die sneespapier bo uit die sak en snak na haar asem. “Dis Nala!”

Nala? Jamie knip haar oë geskok. Nala is Simba se vriendin in *The Lion King*. Jamie ontmoet Clay se oë en merk sy betekenisvolle kyk. Dis nie ’n toevallige geskenk nie. Hy het onthou wat sy hom gister van Sierra vertel het, dat *The Lion King* haar geliefkoosde fliek is.

Sierra haal versigtig ’n heuningkleurige opgestopte leeutjie uit die sak. Sy draai na Jamie en hou dit op. “Kyk, Mamma! Sy’s perfek! Volgende keer kan sý die groot sussie wees!”

“Ek’s seker Wrinkles sal nie omgee om die serp te deel nie.”

“Ja, ek’s ook seker.” Sy kyk vol ontsag na Clay. “Baie dankie, oom Clay.” Sy gee hom ’n vinnige drukkies en hardloop na Jamie toe. “Voel hoe sag is sy, Mamma!”

Nadat Sierra nog ’n paar minute oor Nala ge-oe en ge-aa het, verdwyn sy boontoe om ’n hoed vir Clay te gaan haal. Clay vertel Jamie van hulle oriëntasie en wat die drie weke se opleiding alles gaan behels.

“Ek sal ’n beter speurder wees as ek teruggaan.” Hulle loop kombuis toe. “Joe sal daarvoor sorg.”

“Het hy nie saamgekom nie?” Die lawwigheid by die voordeur het haar van sy vriend laat vergeet. Sy neem ’n ou paar oondhandskoene, maak die oondeur oop en haal die kasserol uit. Die kaas bo-op is ’n ligte goudbruin. Clay loer oor haar skouer. “Wat dit ook al is, ek bestel twee.” Hy help haar om op die toonbank plek te maak. “Dit ruik heerlik.”

“Dis ons gunsteling.” ’n Herinnering flits deur Jamie se gedagtes – die eerste keer toe sy vroeg in hulle huwelik die kasserol vir Jake gemaak het. Sy het die kaas verbrand en die sous verkeerd aangemaak. Hulle kon dit nie eet nie, maar dit het hulle dae lank iets gegee om oor te lag. Sy knip haar oë om van die beeld ontslae geraak. “Wat van Joe?”

“Wanda het hom oorgenooi.” Hy leun teen die toonbank en vou sy arms terwyl hy na haar kyk.

Jamie haal die melk uit die yskas en skink vir Sierra ’n glas. “Dan het dit seker goed gegaan.”

“Ek skat so.” Clay frons effens. “Joe was net taamlik ongemaklik; hy kon nie die regte oomblik kry om vir haar te sê dat hy jammer is nie.” Hy staan met sy handpalms op die toonbank agter hom. “Ek dink sy het haar kinders gister vir die aand na die buurvrou toe gestuur. Joe het gedink dat dit nogal vreemd was.”

“Hulle albei het baie waardeur hulle moet werk.” Jamie neem die kasserol na die eetkamer toe.

Clay volg met die slaai en melk. “Definitief.”

Hulle hoor Sierra voordat hulle haar sien. Sy kom met ’n hofnar-tipe hoed in die een hand, en die oorgroot hoed met die pers plastieklomme in die ander hand om die hoek gestorm. Die ou fluweelhoed wat op haar eie kop was, is vervang met ’n matrooshoed. Sierra versamel hoede vir haar boks speelklere, en hulle is drie van haar gunsteling. “Haai, julle!” Jamie word deur haar opgewekte stem getref. Sierra is ’n gelukkige kind. Miskien ’n bietjie stemmiger as voor die terroriste-aanvalle. Maar gelukkig. Maar nou – om watter rede ook al – borrel sy oor van entoesiasme en haar oë dans soos Jamie dit in jare nie gesien het nie.

“Hierso, oom Clay.” Sy gee vir hom die narrehoed. “Ek dink Oom is reg. Kom ons eet met ons hoede.”

Jamie is op die punt om nee te sê, maar Clay neem die hoed en sit dit op sy kop. “Wat dink jy, Jamie? Sal ek die slegte ouens hiermee afskrik?”

Sy moet haar lip vasbyt om die lag te keer. Sy kyk na Sierra en hou haar kop skeef. “My liefie, ek weet nie of ons gas regtig die hele aand ’n narrehoed wil dra nie.”

“Eintlik ... ” hy lig sy ken met gemaakte waardigheid, “het ek ’n voorliefde vir hofnar-hoede.”

Sierra klap hande. “Ja, Mamma! Dit gaan die lekkerste ete van my hele lewe wees.” Sy sit die matrooshoed op haar eie kop en gee die een met die plastieklomme vir Jamie. “Asseblief, Mamma. Sit dit asseblief op.”

“Sy sal.” Clay buk effens sodat hy Sierra in die oë kan kyk. “Hoede is

verpligtend vir hierdie ete.”

“Nou goed.” Jamie rol haar oë. “Gee my die hoed.”

Clay neem dit by Sierra, kom orent en sit dit op Jamie se kop. “Jy lyk mooi in pers.”

“Dankie.” Jamie se knieë voel bewerig en daar is ’n warm gevoel op haar maag. Sedert Jake het niemand vir haar gesê sy lyk mooi nie. Sy ruk haarself reg en kyk na Sierra. “Is jou hande skoon?”

“Jip.” Sierra gaan sit by die tafel en vou haar hande.

Jamie neem langs haar plaas en Clay gaan sit oorkant hulle. Sy narrehoed val dwarsoor sy kop toe hy sy hande uithou. “Kan ek bid?”

“Ja.” Die warm gevoel beweeg op oor haar wange en sy glimlag. Hy lyk belaglik, maar sy stem en sy oë is net so diep en kwesbaar soos die vorige dag. Sy neem Clay se hand en kyk hoe Sierra dieselfde doen.

Hulle laat sak hulle koppe en Clay begin. “Here, dankie vir hierdie kos ... ” Hy gee Jamie se vingers ’n sagte drukkies, “en die hande wat dit voorberei het. En dankie vir nuwe vriende. In Jesus Naam, amen.”

Jamie het verwag dat sy gedurende die ete senuweeagtig sal wees, onseker oor hoe om met ’n man te gesels wat sy pas ontmoet het. Sy was seker dat sy afwesig en vol skuldgevoelens sou wees omdat sy Jake se foto’s verwyder het. Maar die ete vlieg verby, en al waaraan sy kan dink, is hoe wonderlik sy voel. Hoe wonderlik dit is om Clay hier te hê, sy hand tydens die gebed in hare te voel, om saam met hom aan tafel te wees. Dit voel alles so ongelooflik goed. Op ’n onverklaarbare manier byna reg.

Gedurende die ete betrap Jamie sy oë af en toe op haar, amper asof hy self wil sien of die aangetrokkenheid of band of wat hulle ook al ervaar, steeds daar is. Dit is. Jamie gebruik haar oë om dit vir hom te wys. Hy het in haar lewe gekom en niks was weer dieselfde nie. Sy het nog nie tyd gehad om te analiseer hoe of waarom God hulle bymekaar uitgebring het nie, net dat Hy dit wel gedoen het. Daar is net een gedagte wat ’n tikkie van die aand se sprankel steel. Dis nie Jake of sy foto of hoe sy haar lewe sonder hom moet aanpak nie.

Dis wat oor drie weke met haar gaan gebeur – wanneer Clay huis toe gaan.

Sierra het dit dadelik in haar hart gevoel toe sy Nala uit die geskenkpakkie haal. Oom Clay hou van haar. Hoe anders sou hy van Nala geweet het? Nala is die heel coolste present, en dis nie eens haar verjaarsdag nie. Al haar maatjies het ’n Simba, maar niemand het ’n Nala nie. Nala is ’n meisie, wat beteken dat sy hoede en serpe en mooi sokkies en strikke in haar hare kan dra én die groot sussie kan speel.

Sonder om soos Wrinkles partykeer vies te raak.

Oom Clay is nie ’n gewone grootmens soos kaptein Hisel nie. Kaptein Hisel sal vir haar glimlag en oor haar kop vryf, en partykeer praat hy so lank soos ’n TV-advertensie met haar. Maar hy hou nie regtig van haar nie, want hy vra haar nooit vrae nie.

Sierra het getel. Terwyl hulle geëet het, het oom Clay vir haar agt vrae gevra,



soos wie haar juffrou is en hoeveel kinders daar in haar klas is en wie haar beste maatjies is en wat sy vir Kersfees wil hê.

Aan die einde van die ete het Sierra 'n geheime idee gehad. 'n Geheime idee is wanneer sy aan iets dink, maar niemand anders daarvan vertel nie. Nie eens vir Mamma nie. Dit was haar geheime idee: Omdat die ander tweede pappa na sy regte gesin toe moes gaan, kan oom Clay dalk 'n goeie tweede pappa uitmaak.

Sy het stilletjies na hom gekyk wanneer hy nie sien nie, en haar hart het 'n gevoel gekry. 'n Gevoel dat hy nogal 'n pappa kon wees. Hy het baie geglimlag en die hele aand die narrehoed opgehou. Daarby het hy saam met haar en Mamma Uno gespeel. Hulle het baie gelag en Sierra het nie eens omgegee wie wen nie.

Voordat oom Clay gery het, het hy gebuk en gesê sy moet lekker speel met Nala. Toe het hy Mamma 'n vinnige drukkie gegee, amper soos wanneer kaptein Hisel kom kuier.

Net voor hy uit is, het oom Clay vir haar geknippoog. Sierra het haar asem verras ingetrek, want dis iets wat sy al voor vanaand gesien het. Dalk is dit haar pappa wat dit altyd gedoen het, of haar tweede pappa – die ene wat by hulle kom bly het nadat die torings geval het. Maar in plaas daarvan om deurmekaar te voel, is daar 'n gelukkigheid in haar hart. Want dalk was die knippoog 'n teken dat die Here weet hoe alleen sy sonder haar pappa is.

En dalk gaan die Here die alleenheid vir altyd wegvat.

# Chapter FIFTEEN

Jamie reported to St. Paul's the next day, but for the first time she didn't stop and look at the gaping hole where the towers had stood. Her head was still spinning from the night before, from the new feelings stirring up her heart and soul. How could she care so much about a man she'd only known a few days? Was she using the situation to avoid Aaron Hisel? Or was Clay Miles really as wonderful as he seemed?

Allen, a young man in college, was the first person she talked with that morning. His father, an investment broker, was trapped near the top of the North Tower when it collapsed. Allen had a small photo of his father, one that he wanted to leave as part of the memorial. Jamie helped him find a spot for the picture, and then asked him if he wanted to talk.

"Not really." He shrugged. "I don't talk about it much. It happened, Dad's gone, end of story."

Jamie leaned against one of the thick white pillars that separated the memorial along the perimeter from the sanctuary area of the chapel. Memories of Clay and her dinner the night before came to mind and she willed them away. "Allen, would it be okay if I prayed for you?"

The surprise in the young man's eyes changed to anger, then vulnerability. "The last time I prayed was the morning of September 11." He clenched his jaw and gave a shake of his head. "Apparently God didn't hear me, so I stopped talking."

"But you're here." Her eyes found the pew where she'd sat with Clay the other day. Was he in training now? Would he call her again the way he'd promised? Was she crazy? She blinked hard and focused on the young man.

Allen looked over his shoulder at the tables of memorabilia. His eyes were damp when he found Jamie's eyes again. His chin quivered. "I don't know how to move on."

So many visitors to St. Paul's faced the same thing.

Their loss was so great, they practically limped through the doors. Anger, hurt, and grief kept the calendar at a standstill. Regardless of time's incessant marching, every day was September 12—and without God's divine intervention it always would be. She led the young man to the closest pew and sat down with him.

Her mind drifted back to the night before, to something funny Clay had said about his jester hat. She tightened her hands into fists. *Focus, Jamie...focus.*

"I understand." She looked at the stained-glass window across from them. "My husband was a firefighter; he died in the South Tower."

The young man looked at his knees. "I'm sorry."

"It's okay. He's in heaven; I'm sure about that." She told him about Jake, about finding the faith her husband had always held to, how she wouldn't have survived without that faith.

Sometimes even while she was counseling at St. Paul's her mind wandered. But always she would rein in her thoughts and focus on the matter at hand. Usually the distractions came because of Jake. His picture across the room, or the thought of him kissing her goodbye that brilliant sunny Tuesday morning, hearing his voice telling her he loved her that last time.

But not today.

Today she had to remind herself to stop thinking about Clay Miles and the way her spine tingled when she was with him. Distractions about Jake were a normal thing, especially working at St. Paul's. They were constant reminders that she was in the right place, working alongside people most touched by the tragedy of the terrorist attacks.

But thoughts of Clay?

Every time she had a spare moment that morning she saw Clay's face, the way his eyes met hers over dinner the night before, felt her body protected against his as he handled the men on the ferry.

She dismissed the thoughts. The young man across from her deserved

her complete attention. He was going on about his relationship with his father, and Jamie had to listen to him as if there'd be a test later.

She struggled through two meetings that way before she sensed someone behind her.

"Hey." Aaron's tone held a layer of hurt. "You haven't fallen off the planet after all."

The sound of his voice shot darts at her conscience. She turned around and smiled at him. "Hi." She was suddenly short on words, not sure what to say. "Did you just get here?"

"A few minutes ago." He searched her eyes. "I called you twice last night."

"I know." She forced a light laugh. "Sorry I didn't call back. Sierra and I were crazy busy." It wasn't a lie, not really. But with her feelings so jumbled it was the most she was willing to say.

"Whatever." Aaron tried to look nonchalant, but he didn't pull it off. He lifted his shoulders. "I was just worried. You always call back."

"I'm sorry." Jamie didn't know what else to say. Another visitor walked through the doors and turned to look at the memorial set up on the first table. "It's been busy."

"That reminds me—" Aaron pointed at the displays along the back wall—"let's talk to the others about redoing that area. We have stacks of kids' drawings in the back, letters from children sending wishes to the New York survivors, that sort of thing. It's okay the way it is, but if we built it up some, maybe added an additional shelf along the wall, we could bulk up the display."

Odd. The idea left Jamie flat. A week ago she would've made plans for someone else to pick up Sierra so she could go through boxes of letters, looking for a way to make the makeshift memorial more emotional, more meaningful for the people who passed through.

But today...

"Jamie?" Aaron crossed his arms, his feet spread just enough to give

him the look of a New York City fire captain. “Did you hear me?” “Yes.” Her answer was quick this time. She cleared her throat.

“Yes, that’d be great.” The words sounded forced, even to her.

He took a step back and studied her. “Are you okay?”

More darts. She let her gaze fall to her shoes. His friendship meant a lot to her; she had to tell him at least something of what she was going through if she was going to stay close to him. She looked up. “Can we have lunch today?”

“Sure.” Hope replaced some of the uneasiness in his eyes. “Casey’s Corner?”

“Perfect.” She wanted to tell him it wouldn’t be the type of lunch he was looking forward to, that she had some difficult things to discuss with him. But a visitor was approaching them, a woman in her thirties with red, swollen eyes.

Aaron nudged her. “You get this one; I’ll be in the back if you need me.”

Jamie struggled through the next two hours.

Not only with thoughts of Clay, but with the work at hand. Instead of the usual meaning and emotion that came with her job, she felt trapped. At one point she breathed in through her nose and looked around, alarmed. Was there a gas leak or a ventilation problem? There had to be, because the oxygen was gone. As hard as she tried she couldn’t draw a relaxing breath. Finally, she had to go outside to grab a few mouthfuls of fresh air. Back inside it was more of the same. Just the old, musty smell of the building, and too little air.

She glanced about. Unless she was imagining things, the walls looked closer together, as if the whole place was shrinking, trying to swallow her up whole.

Of course all of it was a delusion. It was her confusion with Aaron and Clay and her memories of Jake, that’s what was sucking the air from her. The building wasn’t running out of oxygen any more than the walls

were closing in, but that didn't change the tightness in her lungs or the way she longed for her shift to be over. It was the first time she'd ever felt this way. Trapped, anxious to leave.

She pondered the idea until finally it made sense. Of course. September 11 was everywhere around her—in the voices and conversations and pictures and artwork. In the streaming video that ran on the TV against the back wall and the displays set up along the exit wall, the ones honoring the massage therapists and cooks and counselors who volunteered their time during the cleanup.

It was all so suddenly overwhelming. Jamie couldn't quite catch her breath until she and Aaron were in a cab headed for Casey's Corner—a bright and cheerful café where they'd shared dozens of lunches. She was glad they were going there. The day was gray and cold, threatening snow. Combined with the strange mix of thoughts in her head and the things she wanted to tell Aaron, she would need an upbeat atmosphere to get through the lunch.

They were almost at the café when he leaned against the cab door and watched her. "You're quiet."

"Yes." She looked over her left shoulder at the city, the buildings and people, all of it passing before her eyes like a familiar river. Thoughts from earlier came rushing back. "Today was hard."

He didn't push her until they were seated at a booth in a quiet part of Casey's Corner, sipping coffee and waiting for their sandwiches. Aaron leaned back against the padded seat. "Why was today hard?"

"I don't know." Her hands were cold. She cupped them around her coffee mug and watched the traffic outside. "I didn't want to talk about September 11 with anyone."

Aaron leaned forward. "Maybe you need a break."

"Maybe." The idea sounded good, but she wasn't sure. "I know I'm supposed to be there; it's the least I can do for Jake."

He didn't add anything. Casey Cummins, the owner of the café,

brought their sandwiches over. It was part of the charm of the place—that the owner took a personal interest in his customers. “Coldest day of the season.” He smiled at them as he set the food down. “Let me know if you want a cup of minestrone.” He brought his thumb and forefinger together in the shape of an *o*. “It’s perfect today.”

They both thanked him but turned down the soup. When he was gone, Aaron took the toothpick from his sandwich and poked it at his water glass. “You want to talk about something?” The look of hope was gone from his eyes. Clearly he could sense some of what she felt.

“I do.” She gripped the bench she was sitting on and sucked in a quick breath through her teeth. Whatever happened, she didn’t want to lose his friendship, didn’t want to hurt him after all he’d done for her. She wasn’t entirely sure she wanted to shut the door on the future. Still, something needed to be said.

“Well?” He uttered a small laugh. “You gonna tell me or make me sit here guessing?”

“Aaron.” Jamie closed her eyes. When she opened them, she was looking straight at him. “I need space.”

His brow lowered into a subtle *v*. “Am I crowding you?”

They hadn’t even seen each other in the past few days. Jamie folded her hands and rested them on the table. *Please, God...give me a way to make him understand*. She ran her tongue over her lower lip and tried again. “I told you I could see things getting more serious, that maybe all I needed was time.”

“Right.”

“Well—“ she held her breath—“things have changed.” She couldn’t tell him about Clay. The entire story sounded ridiculous. She raked her fingers through her hair and cupped her coffee mug again. “I need time away from you, Aaron. So I can sort through my feelings.”

He rested his forearms on the table and looked out the window. He shifted his jaw from side to side, the way he did when he had a lot on his

mind. Finally he looked at her again and let out a quiet breath. “We barely see each other.”

“I know. But I need time from that too.”

“Everywhere? Even St. Paul’s?”

“Yes. Even there.” She wanted to disappear under the table. He was her friend, after all, the person she’d leaned on and turned to more times than she could count. But as much as she appreciated his friendship, she couldn’t let him believe there’d be more between them. Not now. Not when she was almost certain there wouldn’t be.

Aaron sat a little straighter. “Is it something I did?”

“No.” She reached out and touched his hand, but only for the briefest moment. “None of this is your fault. I think it’s something I’m going through. I need to close the last chapter in my life before I can start a new one. Does that make sense?”

His expression told him it didn’t, but after a few seconds he swallowed hard and looked at her. “Whatever you need, Jamie. I care that much.” He was clearly shocked at the change in her, especially after the nice time they had at Chelsea Piers. “I’ll talk to the coordinator and tell them I’m only available in the afternoon.” Since he worked nights, afternoons were bound to be more difficult. More hours awake without a break.

“I’m sorry, Aaron. When I have things figured out I’ll tell you. It just...” A lump filled her throat; she waited until it was gone. “It isn’t fair to keep you guessing. And unless I take some time, maybe I’ll never know what I want. What God wants for me.”

At that last part, his eyes hardened. “I understand.” He pointed to their sandwiches and the regret in his small laugh tore at her. “We better eat.”

Jamie tried, but she barely forced down three bites. She wasn’t hungry, not as long as her heart was in a tailspin. The rest of the lunch was awkward, and Jamie wondered if she was losing her mind. Why cut Aaron



out now just because she'd met Clay? Just because she had a bad day at St. Paul's?

Not until she was on the ferry, two minutes from Staten Island, did she have an answer for herself. She didn't need time away from Aaron because of her feelings for Clay, but because of her feelings for Aaron—feelings that seemed more and more like friendship with every passing hour. She needed her distance to be sure this thing with Clay wasn't some sort of desperate ploy to avoid getting serious with Aaron. With the captain out of the picture for a while, she could think clearly.

And maybe, when a few weeks had passed, she would know without a doubt that she belonged with Aaron Hisel.

The thought simmered in her mind until she reached her car where she found an envelope in a plastic bag tucked beneath her windshield wipers. She wrinkled her nose. Funny. The ferryboat people didn't usually allow canvassers through their parking lots. She pulled the envelope from the bag and saw her name written across the front.

It was from him; it had to be. She knew it before she opened it, and her fingers trembled as she slipped them beneath the envelope flap and pulled out the note.

*Jamie, Thanks again for the great dinner and dress-up party, even though I was disappointed I didn't get to keep the jester hat. I thought it would be a nice touch for the ferry ride.*

He'd jotted down his room number at the hotel. She laughed out loud and turned so she could lean against her car. Her eyes moved further down the page.

*Anyway, Joe's going to see Wanda again tonight. I'll be at the Holiday Inn if you want to talk. Thinking about you, Clay.*

She read that last part three times in a row. *Thinking about you, Clay...*

He was going to be at a lonely hotel room. She folded the note, put it

back in the envelope, and slid into her car. The least she could do was invite him over. They could order pizzas and maybe watch a movie after Sierra went to bed.

Her heart rate picked up at the thought. Yes, that would be a great idea.

She glanced around the lot. What type of car was Clay driving? Some sort of rental, but she wasn't sure what. Then she remembered the note. He was staying at the Holiday Inn. She checked the clock on her dashboard. Forty minutes until Sierra was home. With a heart half a ton lighter than it had been at lunchtime, she headed for the Holiday Inn, parked, and grabbed a piece of paper from a notebook she kept in her van.

*Clay, I can't let you stay here alone all night. Especially without your jester hat. After you catch your breath, come over. We'll get pizza and watch a movie if you want. Hats are optional.*

She stared at the rest of the page, the blank part. If she told him she was thinking about him, it would be the truth. But was that more than she should say? After all, she hadn't known him for a week. Still...

Her pen was poised over the page, ready to tell him he wasn't the only one, that she hadn't been able to stop thinking about him all day. But at the last second she just signed her name, folded the paper, and ran in to the front desk. She wrote his room number on the front, handed the note to the clerk, and asked her to see that Clay Miles got it.

When she picked Sierra up at school, her daughter looked at her longer than usual. "Something's different about you, Mommy."

Jamie waited until Sierra was buckled into the backseat. She gave a small, nervous laugh. "You're silly, Sierra. I'm same as always." "Nuh-uh." Sierra set her backpack on the seat beside her. "Didn't you have your volunteer work today?"

"Yes." Jamie focused on the road, but in her mind all she could see was Clay, coming off the ferryboat, tired, not sure if she'd gotten his note or what her response would be, then getting back to the hotel and reading

her letter.

Sierra was saying something. “Most times when you do your volunteer work you look sad, Mommy. But not today, a’cause you know why?”

“Why?” Jamie turned right, onto their street.

“Because today you look happy, so it’s a nice change. Don’t you think so?”

Suddenly her distracted thoughts settled down long enough to understand the thing her daughter was saying. Most of the time when she worked at St. Paul’s she came home looking sad? Was that really how Sierra saw her? If so, what sort of life was that for her daughter? No father, and a mother who was sad more days than not?

Sierra chattered on, something about school and music class and the girl next to her singing too loud. Jamie tightened her grip on the steering wheel and turned into the driveway. She looked different today.

What a profound observation. One more bit of proof that God was bringing about some sort of change in her life—if only she understood exactly what it was. As they walked into the house, Jamie wondered which was more telling: how working at St. Paul’s left her downcast, or how today—for a change—she looked happy. Because after working the hardest shift since becoming a volunteer, and then telling the captain she didn’t want to see him for a while, there could be only one reason why she’d look happy.

His name was Clay Miles.

## Vyftien

Jamie meld die volgende dag by St. Paul’s aan, maar vir die heel eerste keer neem sy nie ’n paar oomblikke om na die kaal lug te kyk waar die torings gestaan het nie. Sy is steeds in ’n dwaal ná die vorige aand en die nuwe gevoelens wat in haar wakker gemaak is. Hoe kan sy so baie vir iemand omgee wat sy nog net ’n paar dae ken? Gebruik sy die situasie om Aaron Hisel te vermy? Of is Clay Miles regtig so wonderlik?

Allen, 'n student, is die eerste persoon met wie sy die oggend gesels. Sy pa, 'n beleggingsmakelaar, was bo in die noordelike toring vasgekeer toe die gebou ineengestort het. Allen het 'n klein foto'tjie van sy pa gebring wat hy saam met die ander aandenkings by die kapel wil los. Jamie help hom om 'n plek vir die foto te kry en vra hom dan of hy wil gesels.

“Nie regtig nie.” Hy haal sy skouers op. “Ek praat nie veel daaroor nie. Dit het gebeur, Pa is weg, einde van die storie.”

Jamie leun teen een van die dik wit pilare wat die uitstallings teen die mure van die binneste gedeelte van die kapel skei. Herinneringe aan Clay en die vorige aand se ete dreig om na die voorgrond te kom, maar sy dwing dit opsy. “Allen, sal jy omgee as ek vir jou bid?”

Die verbasing in die jong man se oë verander na woede, dan kwesbaarheid. “Die laaste keer toe ek gebid het, was die oggend van 11 September.” Hy byt op sy tande en skud sy kop. “Dis duidelik dat God nie geluister het nie, toe hou ek op praat.”

“En tog is jy hier.” Haar oë beweeg na die bank waar sy en Clay nou die dag gesels het. Is hy nou in opleiding? Sal hy haar weer bel soos hy beloof het? Is sy mal? Sy knip haar oë twee maal en fokus op die jong man.

Allen kyk oor sy skouer na die tafels vol aandenkings. Sy oë blink toe hy weer in Jamie s'n kyk. Sy ken bewe. “Ek weet nie hoe om met my lewe aan te gaan nie.”

Daar is soveel besoekers aan St. Paul's wat dieselfde sê.

Hulle verlies is so groot dat hulle feitlik verlam hier inkom. Woede, pyn en smart het die kalender laat stilstaan. Ongeag die meedoënlose verloop van tyd, is elke dag 12 September – en sonder God se ingryping sal dit vir altyd wees. Sy lei die jong man na die naaste bank en wys dat hy langs haar moet sit.

Haar gedagtes dwaal terug na die vorige aand, na iets snaaks wat Clay oor sy narrehoed gesê het. Sy bal haar vuiste. *Fokus, Jamie ... fokus.*

“Ek verstaan.” Sy kyk na die gebrandskilderde glasvenster oorkant hulle. “My man was 'n brandweerman; hy is in die suidelike toring dood.”

Die jong man kyk na sy knieë. “Ek's jammer.”

“Dis oukei. Hy's in die hemel; ek weet dit.” Sy vertel hom van Jake, van haar ontdekking van die geloof waaraan haar man altyd vasgehou het, en dat sy nie daarsonder sou oorleef nie.

Dit gebeur soms dat Jamie se gedagtes dwaal selfs wanneer sy berading doen. Maar sy slaag altyd daarin om dit terug te bring en op die persoon voor haar te konsentreer. Gewoonlik is Jake vir hierdie afleiding verantwoordelik. Dis óf sy foto aan die oorkant van die lokaal, óf die gedagte aan daardie sonnige Dinsdagoggend toe hy die laaste keer vir haar gesê het dat hy haar liefhet.

Maar vandag is dit anders.

Vandag moet sy haarself dwing om op te hou dink aan Clay Miles en die tinteling wat sy ervaar het toe sy by hom was. Die feit dat Jake haar gedagtes laat dwaal, is iets normaa, veral teen die agtergrond van haar werk by St. Paul's. Hierdie wegloopgedagtes is 'n konstante bevestiging dat sy op die

regte plek is, by die mense wat die swaarste deur die tragedie van die terroriste-aanvalle getref is.

Maar gedagtes oor Clay?

Dit gebeur hoeveel keer dat sy deur die loop van die oggend Clay se gesig voor haar sien, die kyk in sy oë toe hy hare aan tafel ontmoet het, die beskerming wat sy op die veerboot ervaar het toe hy haar uit die mans se kloue gered het.

Sy verwerp hierdie gedagtes. Die jong man oorkant haar verdien haar volle aandag. Hy vertel haar van sy verhouding met sy pa, en Jamie dwing haarself om na hom te luister asof sy ná die tyd gaan toets skryf.

Sy worstel deur twee gesprekke voordat sy van iemand agter haar bewus raak. “Hei.” Daar is ’n fraksie seer in Aaron se stem. “Ek het amper gedink jy het van die aardbol af verdwyn.”

Die klank van sy stem is soos ’n speldeprik in haar gewete. Sy draai om en glimlag vir hom. “Haai.” Sy is skielik sonder woorde, onseker oor wat om te sê. “Het jy nou net hier aangekom?”

“’n Paar minute gelede.” Hy kyk ondersoekend in haar oë. “Ek het jou twee keer gisteraand gebel.”

“Ek weet.” Sy forseer ’n laggie. “Jammer dat ek nie teruggebel het nie. Ek en Sierra het ’n besige aand gehad.” Dis nie ’n leuen nie, nie regtig nie. Maar terwyl haar gevoelens in so ’n warboel is, sien sy nie kans om meer te sê nie.

“Maak nie saak nie.” Aaron probeer nonchalant lyk, maar hy kry dit nie reg nie. Hy trek sy skouers op. “Ek was net bekommerd. Jy bel altyd terug.”

“Ek’s jammer.” Jamie weet nie wat anders om te sê nie. ’n Volgende besoeker het ingekom en kyk na die aandenkings wat op die eerste tafel uitgestal word. “Dit het dol gegaan.”

“Dit herinner my,” Aaron wys na die uitstallings teen die agterste muur, “kom ons hoor by die ander of ons daardie area nie dalk kan opkikker nie. Ons het ’n magdom kinderprente en bokse vol boodskappe van kinders aan oorlewendes. Dis goed genoeg soos dit nou is, maar as ons iets kan doen, dalk ’n ekstra rak inbou, kan ons die uitstalling uitbrei.”

Vreemd. Die idee laat haar onaangeraak. ’n Week gelede sou sy gereël het dat iemand anders Sierra gaan oplaai sodat sy deur die bokse briewe kon gaan, entoesiasies om die uitstalling meer aangrypend en betekenisvol te maak vir die mense wat deur die kapel beweeg.

Maar vandag ...

“Jamie?” Aaron vou sy arms, sy voete net wyd genoeg geplant om hom die voorkoms van ’n brandweerkaptein te gee. “Het jy gehoor wat ek sê?”

“Ja.” Hierdie keer antwoord sy vinnig. Sy maak keel skoon. “Dis ’n uitstekende idee.” Die woorde klink geforseerd, selfs vir haar.

Hy staan terug en bestudeer haar. “Is jy oukei?”

Nog ’n speldeprik. Sy kyk af na haar skoene. Sy vriendskap beteken baie vir haar; sy sal hom ten minste iets van haar situasie moet vertel as sy die vriendskap wil behou. Sy kyk op. “Kan ons vanmiddag iets gaan eet?”

“Dit sal lekker wees.” Die ongemak in sy oë maak plek vir ’n sprankie hoop.

“Casey’s Corner?”

“Perfek.” Sy wil hom waarsku dat dit nie die soort afspraak gaan wees waarna hy uitsien nie, dat sy iets swaars met hom wil bespreek. Maar hulle word deur ’n besoeker genader, ’n vrou in haar dertigerjare met rooigehulde oë.

Aaron raak aan haar arm. “Praat jy met haar; ek sal agter wees as jy my nodig het.”

Jamie worstel deur die volgende twee ure.

Nie net met gedagtes aan Clay nie, maar met die werk self. In plaas van die normale sinvolheid en emosie wat met haar werk gepaardgaan, voel sy vasgekeer. Op een tydstip trek sy haar asem diep in en kyk beangs om haar rond. Is daar ’n gaslek of ventilasieprobleem? Daar moet wees, want daar is nie suurstof nie. Hoe hard sy ook al probeer, sy kan nie ontspanne asemhaal nie. Uiteindelik moet sy uitgaan om vars lug te skep. Terug in die kapel raak sy van voor af oorweldig deur die ou, muwwerige reuk van die gebou en die tekort aan lug.

Sy kyk rond. Tensy sy haar misgis, lyk die mure nader aan mekaar, asof die hele plek besig is om kleiner te word en sy vergruis gaan word.

Dis vanselfsprekend haar verbeelding. Dis haar verwarring oor Aaron en Clay en haar herinneringe aan Jake wat die lug uit haar pers. Die gebou is nie besig om suurstof te verloor of kleiner te word nie, maar dit verander niks aan die knellende gevoel in haar longe of haar begeerte dat die skof moet klaarmaak nie. Dis die eerste keer dat sy so voel. Vasgekeer en angstig om uit te kom.

Die gedagte knaag aan haar totdat dit uiteindelik sin maak. Natuurlik. 11 September is oral rondom haar – in die stemme en gesprekke en foto’s en kunswerke. In die video wat op die TV teen die agterste muur gespeel word en die uitstallings ter ere van die masseerders en kokke en beraders wat tydens die opruiming kom help het.

Sy voel skielik totaal oorweldig. Jamie kan eers weer rustig asemhaal toe sy en Aaron in ’n taxi na Casey’s Corner toe op pad is – ’n helder, vrolike restaurant waar hulle al male sonder tal gaan eet het. Sy is dankbaar dat hulle soontoe gaan. Dis ’n koue, grys dag en dit lyk na sneeu. Tesame met die warboel gedagtes in haar kop en alles wat sy vir Aaron wil sê, sal sy ’n ligte atmosfeer nodig hê om deur die ete te kom.

Hulle is amper by die restaurant toe hy teen die deur leun en na haar kyk. “Jy’s stil.”

“Ja.” Sy kyk oor haar linkerskouer na die stad, die geboue en mense wat soos ’n bekende rivier verbyvloei. Van haar vroeëre gedagtes beur na die oppervlak. “Dit was ’n moeilike dag.”

Hy pols haar nie verder voordat hulle elkeen met ’n koffie in een van die stiller eethokkies in Casey’s Corner sit en vir hulle toebroodjies wag nie. Aaron leun agteroor teen die opgestopte sitplek. “Hoekom was vandag moeilik?”

“Ek weet nie.” Haar hande is koud. Sy kelk hulle om haar koffiebeker en kyk

na die verkeer buitekant. “Ek wou met niemand oor 11 September praat nie.”

Aaron leun vorentoe. “Dalk het jy ’n blaaskans nodig.”

“Dalk.” Dit klink na ’n goeie idee, maar sy is nie seker nie. “Ek weet dat ek hier moet wees; dis die minste wat ek vir Jake kan doen.”

Hy antwoord nie. Casey Cummins, die eienaar van die restaurant, bring hulle toebroodjies. Dis deel van die plek se bekoring – die eienaar se persoonlike aandag aan sy klante. “Dis die koudste wat ek in ’n lang tyd gekry het.” Hy glimlag vir hulle toe hy die kos neersit. “Sê net as julle ’n bakkie minestrone wil hê.” Hy maak ’n o met sy duim en wysvinger. “Dis heerlik vandag.”

Hulle albei sê dankie, maar wys die sop van die hand. Toe hy weg is, haal Aaron die tandestokkie uit sy toebroodjie en tik daarmee teen sy glas water. “Is daar iets waaroor jy wil praat?” Die hoopvolheid is weg uit sy oë. Dis duidelik dat hy iets van haar emosies kan aanvoel.

“Daar is.” Sy plaas haar hande op haar sitplek en trek haar asem in. Wat ook al gebeur, sy wil nie sy vriendskap verloor nie, wil hom nie seermaak ná alles wat hy vir haar gedoen het nie. Sy is nie heeltemal seker of sy die deur na die toekoms wil toemaak nie. Tog kan sy nie niks sê nie.

“En?” Hy gee ’n klein laggie. “Gaan jy met my praat of my hier laat sit en raai?”

“Aaron.” Jamie maak haar oë toe. Toe sy hulle oopmaak, kyk sy reguit na hom. “Ek het ruimte nodig.”

Daar verskyn ’n v tussen sy wenkbroue. “Oordoen ek dit?”

Hulle het mekaar die afgelope paar dae nie eens gesien nie. Jamie vou haar hande op die tafel. *Asseblief, Here ... gee my die woorde om hom te help verstaan.* Sy lek oor haar onderlip en probeer weer. “Ek het vir jou gesê ek kon dinge sien ernstiger raak en dat ek dalk meer tyd nodig het.”

“Ek onthou.”

“Ag, Aaron,” sy hou haar asem op, “dinge het verander.” Sy kan hom nie van Clay vertel nie. Die hele situasie sal vir hom belaglik klink. Sy kam met haar vingers deur haar hare en vou albei hande weer om haar koffiebeker. “Ek het tyd weg van jou nodig, Aaron. Sodat ek my gevoelens kan uitsorteer.”

Hy rus met sy voorarms op die tafel en kyk deur die venster. Hy beweeg sy kakebeen soos wanneer hy deur iets gehinder word. Uiteindelik kyk hy weer na haar en laat sy asem sag uit. “Ons sien mekaar skaars.”

“Ek weet. Maar ek het tyd op my eie nodig.”

“Orals? Selfs by St. Paul’s?”

“Ja. Selfs daar.” Sy wil onder die tafel inklim. Hy is immers haar vriend, die persoon op wie sy gesteun het en tot wie sy haar male sonder tal gewend het. Maar hoe kosbaar sy vriendskap ook al vir haar is, sy kan hom nie laat glo dat daar iets meer tussen hulle sal wees nie. Nie nou nie. Nie terwyl sy amper seker is daar sal nooit iets wees nie.

Aaron sit regop. “Is dit iets wat ek gedoen het?”

“Nee.” Sy steek haar hand uit en raak aan syne, maar net vlietend. “Jy het niks gedoen nie. Ek dink dis iets waardeur ek moet gaan. Ek moet die laaste

hoofstuk in my lewe afsluit voordat ek met 'n nuwe een kan begin. Maak dit vir jou sin?"

Sy uitdrukking verklap dat dit nie vir hom sin maak nie, maar ná 'n paar sekondes sluk hy swaar en kyk na haar. "Wat jy ook al nodig het, Jamie. Dis hoeveel ek omgee." Hy is duidelik verslae oor die verandering in haar, veral ná die lekker dag wat hulle by Chelsea Piers gehad het. "Ek sal met die koördineerder praat en sê dat ek net middae beskikbaar sal wees." Aangesien hy nagte werk, sal middae moeiliker wees. Hy sal vir langer sonder slaap oor die weg moet kom.

"Ek's jammer, Aaron. As ek dinge uitsorteer het, sal ek vir jou sê. Dis net ..." Daar is skielik 'n knop in haar keel en sy wag totdat dit weg is. "Dis nie regverdig om jou aan 'n lyntjie te hou nie. En ek moet hierdie tyd gebruik om uit te vind wat ek wil hê. Wat God vir my wil hê."

Haar laaste woorde bring 'n hardheid in sy oë. "Ek verstaan." Hy wys na hulle toebroodjies en sy hartseer laggie breek haar hart. "Ons moet seker eet."

Jamie probeer, maar sy kry nouliks drie happies afgesluk. Sy is nie honger nie, nie terwyl haar hart so angstig klop nie. Die res van hulle ete is ongemaklik, en Jamie wonder of sy besig is om kop te verloor. Hoekom moet sy Aaron nou afsny net omdat sy Clay ontmoet het? Net omdat sy 'n moeilike dag by St. Paul's gehad het?

Dis eers op die veerboot, twee minute van Staten Island af, dat sy die vraag kan beantwoord. Dis nie haar gevoelens vir Clay wat maak dat sy nodig het om van Aaron weg te kom nie. Dis haar gevoelens vir Aaron – gevoelens wat haar by die dag al hoe meer aan 'n vriendskap herinner. Sy het tyd op haar eie nodig om seker te maak dat hierdie ding met Clay nie net 'n desperate set is om te verhoed dat sy ernstig by Aaron betrokke raak nie. Met die kaptein uit die prentjie sal sy helder kan dink.

En dalk sal sy oor 'n paar weke met sekerheid weet dat sy by Aaron Hisel hoort.

Die gedagte prut in haar kop totdat sy haar motor bereik waar 'n koevert in 'n plastiëksakkie onder haar ruitveërs op haar wag. Sy trek haar neus op 'n plooi. Snaaks. Die veerbootmense laat gewoonlik nie toe dat daar pamflette uitgedeel word nie. Sy haal die koevert uit die sakkie en sien dat haar naam daarop geskryf is.

Dit is van hom af; dit moet wees. Sy weet dit voordat sy die koevert oopmaak, en haar vingers bewe toe sy die flap lig en die briefie uithaal.

*Jamie, weereens dankie vir die heerlike ete. Net 'n jammerte dat ek nie die narrehoed kon hou nie. Ek't gedink dit sou 'n tikkie flair aan vanoggend se veerbootrit verleen.*

Hy het sy hotel en kamernommer neergeskryf. Sy lag hardop en draai om sodat sy met haar rug teen haar motor staan. Sy lees verder.

*In elk geval, Joe gaan vanaand weer na Wanda toe. Ek sal by die Holiday Inn wees as jy wil gesels. Dink aan jou, Clay.*



Sy lees die laaste deeltjie drie keer na mekaar. *Dink aan jou, Clay ...*  
Hy gaan in 'n eensame hotelkamer wees. Sy vou die briefie op, bêre dit weer in die koevert en klim in haar motor. Die minste wat sy kan doen, is om hom oor te nooi. Hulle kan wegneempizzas kry en 'n DVD kyk wanneer Sierra gaan slaap.

Die gedagte laat haar hart vinniger klop. Ja, dit sal 'n goeie idee wees. Sy kyk om haar rond. Watter soort motor bestuur Clay? Iets wat hy gehuur het, maar sy is nie seker nie. Dan onthou sy die briefie. Hy bly by die Holiday Inn. Sy kyk na die horlosie op haar paneelbord. Dis nog veertig minute voordat Sierra huis toe kom. Haar hart is 'n halwe ton ligter as vroeër toe sy na die Holiday Inn ry, parkeer en 'n stukkie papier uit 'n notaboek skeur wat sy in die motor hou.

*Clay, jy kan nie die hele aand alleen hier bly nie. Veral nie sonder jou narrehoed nie. Kom kuier. Ons sal pizza kry en 'n DVD kyk as jy wil. Hoede is opsioneel.*

Sy kyk na die res van die bladsy. As sy skryf dat sy aan hom dink, sal dit die waarheid wees. Maar is dit nie meer as wat sy behoort te sê nie? Sy ken hom immers nog nie eens 'n week nie. Tog ...

Haar hand met die pen verstil, gereed om te skryf dat hy nie die enigste een is nie, dat sy nog heeldag aan hom dink. Maar op die laaste nippertjie skryf sy net haar naam, vou die papier op en haas haar na die ontvangstoonbank. Nadat sy Clay se kamernommer daarop neergeskryf het, gee sy die briefie vir die klerk en vra haar om toe te sien dat Clay Miles dit kry.

Toe sy Sierra by die skool gaan oplaai, kyk haar dogtertjie langer as gewoonlik na haar. "Mamma lyk anders."

Jamie wag totdat Sierra vasgegespe is. Sy gee 'n senuweeagtige laggie. "Jy verbeel jou, my skat. Ek lyk soos altyd."

"Nee." Sierra sit haar tas op die sitplek langs haar neer. "Het Mamma nie vandag gaan werk nie?"

"Ja." Jamie fokus op die pad, maar in haar gedagtes sien sy hoe Clay van die veerboot afstap, moeg, onseker of sy sy boodskap gekry het of wat haar reaksie sou wees. Dan hoe hy by die hotel aankom en haar briefie lees.

Sierra is besig om iets te sê. "Altyd as Mamma by die kerk gaan werk, lyk Mamma hartseer. Maar nie vandag nie. Wil Mamma weet hoekom?"

"Hoekom?" Jamie draai regs toe sy hulle straat bereik.

"Want vandag lyk Mamma bly, en dis 'n goeie verandering. Dink Mamma nie so nie?"

Haar onstuimige gedagtes kom tot ruste toe sy hoor wat haar dogtertjie sê. Kom sy gewoonlik hartseer by die huis nadat sy by St. Paul's gewerk het? Is dit regtig hoe Sierra haar sien? Watter soort lewe is dit vir haar dogtertjie? Sonder 'n pa, en met 'n ma wat die meeste van die tyd hartseer is?

Sierra babbel verder, iets oor die skool en sangklas en die dogtertjie langs haar wat te hard gesing het. Jamie hou die stuurwiel stywer vas en draai by hulle oprit in. Sy lyk vandag anders.

Wat 'n insiggewende waarneming. Nog 'n bewys dat God besig is om die een of ander soort verandering in haar lewe te bewerk – as sy maar net geweet het wat presies dit is. Toe hulle by die huis ingaan, wonder Jamie wat die meeste gewig dra: die feit dat haar werk by St. Paul's haar hartseer laat, of dat sy vandag – vir 'n verandering – gelukkig lyk. Want nadat sy haar swaarste skof as vrywilliger voltooi het en daarna vir kaptein Hisel moes sê dat sy hom vir 'n rukkie nie wil sien nie, kan daar net een rede wees waarom sy gelukkig lyk. Sy naam is Clay Miles.

# Chapter SIXTEEN

Clay was in his room changing when he noticed the light blinking on his motel phone. Probably the front desk asking if he wanted fresh towels. He ignored it and searched through his closet.

The day had been a long one, full of drills and workshops on technique. The group of officers in training would spend the first part of the three weeks learning the most up-to-date detective skills—crime scene forensics, blood-spatter evidence, ballistics testing. The last eight days would send them into the streets of New York, working alongside some of the city’s top detectives.

One of the captains briefed them that morning about the realities of the job.

“Some of our crime scenes are, well—” sarcasm filled his tone and his smile—“let’s just say they’re not in the penthouse district. And some of our investigations take place at night.” The grin faded. “You’ll wear flak jackets and carry weapons. The streets of New York City aren’t for the faint of heart.”

Clay received approval to carry a weapon during training from his captain in Los Angeles. Some of the paperwork had to be fast-tracked, but during his first week off the department was able to clear him of any guilt in the shooting of the carjacking suspect.

Good thing. Clay couldn’t have made the trip without clearance to carry a weapon. It was why he’d been armed on the ferryboat, and why he’d met Jamie Bryan. Jamie, who’d made it difficult to concentrate these past few days. He was drawn to her in a way that consumed him, left him breathless. Even now he wondered if she’d gotten his note, if she’d considered leaving one on his car, as well. He slipped on a pullover and glanced at the phone again.

What if the message was from Jamie?

He took light running steps to the phone, dialed 0, and sat down on

the bed.

“Front desk.”

“Yes, hi.” Clay kicked his feet up and leaned back against the headboard. “My message light was flashing.”

“Okay, sir, let me check that for you. Just a moment.” She was gone for a few seconds. “Yes, a woman came in and gave us a note. It has your first name and room number on it.”

The smile took hold of his face and didn’t let go. It had to be Jamie. “Could you send it up?”

“Certainly, Mr. Michaels.”

A minute later there was a knock at his door. “Bellman.”

Clay opened it, took the note, and tipped the man. He unfolded the note and read it.

She’d gotten the note, after all. He felt giddy as a schoolboy with a first-time crush, and no wonder. After three years of bad setups and superficial dates, he’d finally met a woman like he’d always hoped. One with goals and values and a faith that colored everything about her.

But this relationship wouldn’t be easy.

He folded the note, tossed it on the nightstand, and grabbed his keys. On the way across the island he thought about how there had been no pictures of her dead husband anywhere. Not that he was looking, but it seemed strange. She was still single, after all. It would make sense to have pictures up.

Of course, maybe it was part of her healing process. Keeping his image out of sight so she could move on with life. Clay wasn’t sure. Just that the look in her eyes when she’d talked about him said very clearly she’d never loved anyone the way she’d loved him.

Sadness settled over him, weighing his heart down like a sodden wool cloak.

How smart was it to fall for a woman with that sort of devotion to someone else? Even dead, the man might always hold the first place in her

heart, and what sort of life would that be? Second place?

He dismissed the thought.

All of it was insane, anyway. He'd only met her two days before. They'd be friends for the three weeks he was in New York, and maybe write once in a while. What more could ever come of it with him living so far away?

Not until she opened the door did he admit he was fooling himself. Big time.

Through their pizza dinner, he could hardly take his eyes off her. During the ice cream sandwich dessert and a story, compliments of Sierra who was learning to read, he could hardly tear his gaze from her.

Jamie Bryan had captured his imagination from the moment he saw her. There was no logical reason, no explanation, but he was falling. Hard.

And nothing in his power could make him stop.

The story was finished and Jamie moved to the edge of Sierra's bed. She looked back at Clay. "Wanna pray with us?"

"Sure." His heart thudded against the wall of his chest. This was the picture, wasn't it? The family scene he'd been longing for all his adult years? He took his place between them and bowed his head, not sure of their routine.

Sierra reached out and took one hand while Jamie took the other, giving his fingers a light squeeze. She spoke the prayer in hushed tones.

"Dear Jesus, please be with Sierra as she sleeps and please watch over her. Help her to have peaceful dreams and wake up happy about a new day. We know You have great plans for Sierra, God. Please help her to look for those every day of her life. We love You, Lord. Amen."

Clay held onto Jamie's hand a few seconds after the prayer ended, then let go. When they left her room, he stopped outside Sierra's door. "I love that."

Jamie smiled. "What?"

"The way you are with her, projecting God's blessings onto her."

“Oh.” Jamie started down the stairs. She looked over her shoulder as she walked. “You mean the part about God’s plans for her?”

“Right.” He stayed close behind her. “Jeremiah 29:11. Kids need to hear that so badly.”

“They do.” She turned around at the foot of the stairs and her smile eased some. “It’d be easy for her to grow up mad at God, because of what happened to Jake.” Her eyes shone with a strength that Clay knew only came from walking in faith. “But God has plans for us no matter what bad thing has happened. Even losing Jake.”

They went into the family room, and Jamie pointed to a shelf of videos. “Feel like a movie?”

“Hmmm.” He sat down at one end of the sofa, glanced around the room, and spotted a backgammon board. “Hey, you play?”

She followed his gaze. “Backgammon? Sure.” She grabbed it and brought it back to the sofa. “Just a minute.” She slipped a CD in the player and before she was sitting down, Kenny Chesney started playing in the background.

“Country, huh?”

“There’s something about a good country song.” She took the spot at the opposite end of the sofa so there was enough room to open the game between them. She held his eyes for a few beats. “Country songs tell a story; I like that.”

“Me too.” Clay set up the backgammon pieces and tried to sort through his feelings. They had everything in common, and a chemistry that couldn’t be denied. But in less than three weeks he’d be back in LA. He didn’t want to think about it.

They played five games and several times his fingers brushed against hers. Each time he could feel the sensation throughout his body. Once in a while he would look at her, almost certain she was feeling the same thing.

“I believe I’m the winner.” Jamie lifted her chin and closed the board. It was almost ten o’clock, and they both had to go into the city in the

morning. She set the game on the floor and leaned against the sofa arm. Her eyes were soft again, shining with the vulnerability that had caught his attention the first time they'd spoken. "I had fun tonight."

"Me too."

They were silent for a moment, studying each other. Clay had so many questions. What was happening between them? How was she feeling, and why were they playing with each other's hearts when he had to go home in a few weeks? Did she and her husband play backgammon together?

Instead of voicing his thoughts, he put his arm up on the sofa back and tried not to dwell on the fact that he had no answers.

"How's Joe doing?"

"He was glad Wanda invited him back; after last night he wasn't sure he'd get to see her again."

"Maybe tonight's the night."

"The apology?" Clay leaned sideways and rested his head in his hand. "I hope so." He shook his head. "Crazy guy. If someone's got something to say to a person they care about, they should come out and say it."

Not until the words were out did he realize what he'd said. She raised her brow and gave a subtle sideways nod. "Good idea." Her eyes found a deeper place in his heart. "But it's not always easy...or wise."

"No, it isn't." Clay watched her. Was she talking about herself or him? He wanted to ask, but she was right. It wasn't easy or wise to talk about what was happening between them. It was simply too soon. Besides, what if he was imagining the chemistry between them? Maybe Jamie was merely a lonely widow hungry for company. Since Clay was a police officer, and he'd rescued her on the boat, and he was only in town for a few weeks, he was a pretty safe bet.

He checked his watch, stood, and stretched. "I guess I better go." His neck still hurt from the shooting, but it was getting better. "Thanks again for dinner."

“It was fun.” Jamie stood and led the way toward the foyer. “Let’s do it again.”

“Sure.”

They reached the door and Jamie turned to face him. The entryway was dark and shadowy, the only light coming from two rooms away. Somehow the mood of the moment became more intimate. She leaned against the door. “Can I tell you something?”

“Okay.” He rested his shoulder against the wall, careful to keep several feet between them.

“I haven’t...” She bit her lip, her eyes locked on his. “I haven’t done this since...since Jake died.”

Though her eyes were vulnerable, transparent, she hadn’t said anything that dipped below the surface all night. Until now.

“Jamie.” His heart melted. It must have been so difficult to have him over, give him dinner, and share a night of backgammon with him in the place where she and her husband had loved and laughed and started their family.

She hung her head and in the shimmer of distant light a single tear fell to the floor. “I thought you should know.”

The hug was inevitable. Everything about the moment cried out for him to take her in his arms and soothe away the pain.

He reached out to her. “C’mere.”

“I’m sorry.” She sniffed and took two slow steps toward him. “I’m really not sad.” Her eyes lifted to his. Though they were wet, they shone with something more than sorrow. “I like you being here, Clay.”

Their faces were inches apart, but Clay wouldn’t kiss her. Not even when everything in him wanted to. Instead he folded his arms around her and held her close. He stroked her hair and let her rest her head against his chest. “Guess what?” He leaned down some and whispered near the side of her face.

“What?” She uttered a sound that was more laugh than cry. “You



think I'm crazy?"

"Nope." He pulled back and spoke into her eyes. "I like being here too." He let go of her and smiled. "Maybe you and Sierra can join me in the city tomorrow night...find something fun to do."

Her smile in the shadows warmed him in a way nothing else had. "I think we'd like that."

He stepped closer to the door and opened it. "Good night, Jamie."

"Good night." A cool breeze shot its way into the house and she crossed her arms tight. "Thanks for understanding."

He nodded, and then he was outside and the door was closing. The air was freezing cold, but the sky was crystal clear. It was amazing, this close to Manhattan, that he could see any stars. But that night the sky was full of them. He stopped and stared up. *God...it's too soon, but it feels like something's happening.* He pulled the edges of his coat tighter around him. This time he spoke out loud. "Lead me, God...don't let me get ahead of You."

Halfway to the car he was going over the evening in his mind—especially the last few minutes, the way Jamie leaned on him, the way she held him—when something occurred to him. One of the main questions he had about Jamie and whatever it was they'd found together had just been answered.

The chemistry between them definitely was *not* a figment of his imagination.

## Sestien

Clay is in sy kamer besig om te verklee toe hy die liggie op sy hotelfoon sien flikker. Waarskynlik ontvangs wat wil hoor of hy skoon handdoeke nodig het. Hy ignoreer dit en gaan kyk in sy kas.

Dit was 'n lang dag, vol lesings en werkswinkels oor tegniek. Die eerste deel van die drie weke gaan aan die nuutste tegnologie in die veld afgestaan word – forensiese ondersoeke van misdaadtonele, bloedspatsel-getuienis, ballistiese toetsing. Gedurende die laaste agt dae gaan hulle saam met die stad se

topspeurders uitgestuur word.

Een van die kapteins het hulle die oggend oor die realiteite van die werk ingelig.

“Sommige van ons misdaadtonele is, wel ... ” Sy stem en glimlag was sarkasties: “Kom ons sê net dit is nie in die rykmansbuurte nie. En sommige van ons ondersoeke word snags gedoen.” Sy glimlag het verdwyn. “Julle sal koeëlvaste baadjies dra en gewapen wees. Die strate van New York is nie vir sissies nie.”

Clay se kaptein in Los Angeles het toestemming gegee dat hy gedurende opleiding ’n wapen mag dra. Sommige van die dokumentasie moes met spoedpos gestuur word, maar gedurende sy eerste week verlof het die departement hom van enige skuld in die skietvoorval onthef. Dis ’n goeie ding. Clay sou nie gekom het as dit nie vir die klaring was om ’n wapen te dra nie. Dis waarom hy op die veerboot gewapen was, en waarom hy Jamie Bryan ontmoet het. Jamie wat dit die afgelope paar dae vir hom onmoontlik maak om te konsentreer. Hy is op ’n amper verterende manier tot haar aangetrokke, op ’n manier wat hom asemloos laat. Hy wonder of sy sy briefie gekry het, en of sy dit oorweeg het om een op sy motor te los. Hy trek ’n oortrektrui aan en kyk weer na die telefoon.

Sê nou dis ’n boodskap van Jamie af?

Hy haas hom na die telefoon, skakel “0” en gaan sit op die bed.

“Ontvangs.”

“Ja, haai.” Clay strek sy bene voor hom uit en leun terug teen die kopstuk.

“My telefoonliggie het geflikker.”

“Net ’n oomblik, Meneer, ek kyk gou vir u.” Hy wag net ’n paar sekondes.

“Ja, hier was ’n vrou wat ’n nota gelos het. U voornaam en kamernommer is daarop neergeskryf.”

’n Glimlag pluk aan sy mond en bly daar. Dit moet Jamie wees. “Kan julle dit opstuur?”

“Sekerlik, meneer Michaels.”

’n Minuut later is daar ’n klop aan sy deur.

Clay maak oop, neem die briefie by die hoteljoggie en betaal hom ’n footjie. Hy vou die nota oop en lees haar boodskap.

Dan het sy tog die briefie gekry. Hy voel soos ’n uitgelate skoolseun wat vir die eerste keer verlief is. En dis ook g’n wonder nie. Ná drie jaar van teleurstellende en kunsmatige afsprake het hy uiteindelik die soort vrou ontmoet waarvan hy gedroom het. Een met doelwitte en waardes en ’n geloof wat haar hele lewe inkleur.

Maar hierdie verhouding gaan nie maklik wees nie.

Hy vou die nota op, gooi dit op die bedkassie neer en gryp sy sleutels. Op pad dink hy aan die feit dat daar nêrens foto’s van haar oorlede man was nie. Nie dat hy gekyk het nie, maar hy het gedink dis vreemd. Dis nie asof sy intussen iemand anders ontmoet het nie. Dit sou sin maak om foto’s van hom daar te hê.

Dis moontlik dat dit deel van haar genesingsproses is. Dalk voel sy dis beter om hom nie te sien nie sodat sy met haar lewe kan voortgaan. Clay is nie seker nie. Net dat wanneer sy oor hom praat, Clay in haar oë kan sien sy was nog nooit vir iemand so lief soos vir hom nie.

’n Hartseer kom lê soos ’n swaar kombers oor sy hart.

Is dit wys om verlief te raak op ’n vrou met daardie soort toewyding aan iemand anders? Selfs in sy afwesigheid kan die man dalk altyd die eerste plek in haar hart inneem, en watter soort lewe sal dit wees? Tweede plek?

Hy raak ontslae van die gedagte.

Die hele ding is in elk geval absurd. Hy het haar twee dae gelede ontmoet. Hulle sal vriende wees vir die drie weke wat hy in New York is, en dalk af en toe vir mekaar skryf. Hoe kan daar iets ontwikkel terwyl hy so ver woon?

Dis eers toe sy die deur oopmaak dat hy moet erken hy probeer homself flous. Terwyl hulle eet, kan hy skaars sy oë van haar afhou. Gedurende nagereg en ’n storie, soos vertel deur Sierra wat al fluks lees, kan hy sy oë nie van haar af wegskeur nie.

Jamie Bryan het sy verbeelding aangegryp toe hy haar die eerste keer gesien het. Hy kan nie ’n logiese rede of verduideliking daarvoor gee nie, maar hy is besig om verlief te raak. Vinnig.

En daar is niks wat hy kan doen om dit te keer nie.

Toe die storie klaar is, gaan sit Jamie op die rand van Sierra se bed. Sy kyk om na Clay. “Wil jy saam met ons bid?”

“Sekerlik.” Sy hart klop met swaar slae. Dis die toneeltjie. Die toneel waarna hy sy hele volwasse lewe gesmag het. Hy gaan sit tussen hulle en laat sak sy kop, onseker van hulle roetine.

Sierra neem sy een hand en toe Jamie die ander neem, gee sy sy vingers ’n sagte drukkies. Sy bid in ’n gedempte stem.

“Liewe Jesus, wees asseblief by Sierra wanneer sy slaap en hou u hand oor haar. Gee asseblief vir haar mooi drome en help haar om môre met ’n gelukkige hart op te staan. Ons weet dat U wonderlike planne vir Sierra het, Here. Help haar asseblief om elke dag daarna te soek. Ons is lief vir U, Here. Amen.”

Clay hou Jamie se hand nog ’n paar sekondes vas voordat hy dit laat gaan. Toe hulle uitloop, gaan staan hy voor Sierra se deur. “Dis so mooi, Jamie.”

Jamie glimlag. “Wat?”

“Jou manier met haar, hoe jy God se seën oor haar bid.”

“O.” Jamie bereik die trappies en kyk oor haar skouer. “Praat jy van God se planne vir haar?”

“Ja.” Hy bly kort op haar hakke. “Jeremia 29:11. Kinders het so nodig om dit te hoor.”

“Dit is so.” Aan die onderpunt van die trap draai sy om en haar glimlag vervaag effens. “Dit sou vir haar maklik wees om groot te word en die Here te blameer vir wat met Jake gebeur het.” Haar oë getuig van ’n krag wat slegs vanuit ’n geloofsluwe kom. “Maar God weet wat Hy vir ons beplan, selfs

wanneer slegte goed gebeur. Selfs iets soos Jake se dood.”

Hulle loop na die leefkamer toe en Jamie wys na ’n rak met video’s. “Is jy lus vir ’n flik?”

“Hmmm.” Hy gaan sit op die een punt van die bank, kyk deur die vertrek en sien ’n backgammon-bord. “Speel jy?”

Sy volg sy oë. “Backgammon? Hoekom nie.” Sy gaan haal die speletjie en sit dit langs hom neer. “Net ’n oomblik.” Sy laai ’n CD in die speler en voordat sy kom sit, begin Kenny Chesney op die agtergrond speel.

“Country?”

“Daar’s net iets aan ’n goeie countryliedjie.” Sy gaan sit twee plekke van hom af sodat daar genoeg plek tussen hulle is vir die speletjie. Sy kyk vir ’n paar oomblikke in sy oë. “Countrymusiek vertel ’n storie; ek hou daarvan.”

“Ek ook.” Clay pak die stukke uit en probeer sy gevoelens orden. Hulle het alles in gemeen, en ’n onbetwisbare aangetrokkenheid. Maar oor minder as drie weke sal hy weer in LA wees. Hy wil nie daaraan dink nie.

Hulle speel vyf potte en elke keer wanneer sy vingers terloops aan hare raak, versprei die sensasie deur sy hele liggaam. Wanneer hy af en toe na haar kyk, kry hy die gevoel dat sy dit ook ervaar.

“Vergeet daarvan, Clay. Jy gaan my nie vanaand wen nie.” Jamie lig haar ken en vou die bord toe. Dis amper tienuur en hulle moet albei môreoggend ingaan stad toe. Sy sit die speletjie op die vloer neer en leun teen die bank se armleuning. Haar oë is sag, gevul met die weerloosheid wat hom die eerste keer aangegryp het toe hulle gepraat het. “Ek het vanaand geniet.”

“Ek ook.”

Hulle kyk vir ’n oomblik peinsend na mekaar. Clay het soveel vrae. Wat is besig om tussen hulle te gebeur? Hoe voel sy, en waarom speel hulle met mekaar se harte terwyl hy oor ’n paar weke moet huis toe gaan? Het sy en haar man backgammon gespeel? Maar in plaas daarvan om iets te sê, sit hy sy arm op die rugleuning en probeer vergeet dat hy geen antwoorde het nie.

“Hoe gaan dit met Joe?”

“Hy was bly dat Wanda hom weer genooi het; ná gisteraand was hy nie seker of hy haar weer sou sien nie.”

“Dalk is vanaand die aand.”

“Vir die verskoning?” Clay draai dwars en stut sy kop op sy hand. “Ek hoop so.” Hy skud sy kop. “Ek wens hy wil rigting kry. As ’n mens iets vir iemand wil sê vir wie jy omgee, moet jy eenvoudig oë toekny en dit sê.”

Dis eers toe die woorde uit is dat hy besef wat hy gesê het. Sy lig haar wenkbroue en knik subtiel. “Dis waar.” Dit voel asof sy tot in sy hart kan sien.

“Maar dis nie altyd maklik ... of wys nie.”

“Jy’s reg.” Clay kyk na haar. Praat sy oor hom of haarself? Hy wil vra, maar sy is reg. Dis nie maklik of wys om te praat oor wat besig is om tussen hulle te gebeur nie. Dis eenvoudig te vroeg. En buitendien, sê nou net hy verbeel hom die vonk tussen hulle? Dalk is Jamie bloot ’n eensame weduwee en uitgehonger vir geselskap. Aangesien Clay ’n polisieman is en hy haar op die

boot gered het, en net vir 'n paar weke in New York is, is hy 'n veilige kandidaat.

Hy kyk op sy horlosie, staan op en rek hom uit. “Ek moet seker by die hotel kom.” Sy nek is nog seer van die skietery, maar al heelwat beter. “Dankie vir die ete.”

“Dit was lekker.” Jamie staan op en loop vooruit na die portaal. “Ons moet weer so maak.”

“Ek stem saam.” Toe hulle die deur bereik, draai Jamie na hom. Die enigste lig in die skemer portaal kom van die woonkamer. Daar is skielik iets intiems aan die oomblik. Sy leun teen die deur. “Kan ek vir jou iets sê?”

“Oukei.” Hy staan met sy skouer teen die muur, bedag daarop om 'n effense afstand te bewaar.

“Ek't nie ...” Sy byt haar lip vas, haar oë in syne. “Dis die eerste keer dat ek so iets doen na ... na Jake se dood.”

Alhoewel haar oë die hele aand kwesbaar en ongesluit was, het haar woorde net aan die oppervlak geraak. Tot nou.

“Jamie.” Sy hart vermurwe. Dit moes bitter moeilik gewees het om hom oor te nooi en heelaand te kuier in die huis waar sy en haar man mekaar liefgehad en gelag het en met 'n gesin begin het.

Sy laat hang haar kop en in die dowwe lig sien hy haar trane. “Ek het net gedink jy moet weet.”

Alles in hom skree om haar vas te hou en te troos totdat die seer weggaan.

Hy steek sy arms na haar toe uit. “Kom hier.”

“Ek's jammer.” Sy snuif en gee twee tree na hom toe. “Ek's nie regtig hartseer nie.” Sy kyk op in sy oë. Alhoewel hulle tranerig blink, is daar meer as net hartseer daarin verskuil. “Ek's bly jy is hier, Clay.”

Hulle gesigte is sentimeters van mekaar af, maar Clay gaan haar nie soen nie. Ten spyte daarvan dat sy hele wese daarna smag. Hy vou haar in sy arms toe en laat haar kop teen sy bors rus. “Raai wat.” Hy laat sak sy kop en fluister naby haar oor.

“Wat?” Iets soos 'n verleë laggie ontsnap uit haar keel. “Dink jy ek's mal?”

“Glad nie.” Hy beweeg effens terug en kyk in haar oë. “Dis vir my ook lekker om hier te wees.” Hy laat haar gaan en glimlag. “Dalk kan jy en Sierra my môre aand in die stad kry, dan kan ons iets lekkers gaan doen.”

Haar glimlag in die skadu's stuur 'n warmte deur hom wat hy nie ken nie. “Dit klink lekker.”

Hy gee 'n tree tot by die deur en maak dit oop. “Lekker slaap, Jamie.”

“Goeienag.” Die aandlug is koud en sy vou haar arms styf om haar. “Dankie dat jy verstaan.”

Hy knik en toe is hy buitekant en die deur gaan toe. Dis vriesend, maar die naghemel is kristalhelder. Dis eintlik ongelooflik dat hy hoegenaamd sterre kan sien so naby aan Manhattan. Maar vanaand flonker hulle in hul miljoene. Hy gaan staan en kyk op. *Here ... dis te gou, maar dit voel asof daar iets gebeur.* Hy trek sy jas stywer om hom vas. Hierdie keer praat hy hardop. “Lei

my, Here ... ek wil nie voor U uithardloop nie.”

Op pad na sy motor toe herleef hy die aand – veral die laaste paar minute toe Jamie teen hom gestaan het, aan hom vasgehou het – toe iets tot hom deurdring. Een van sy grootste vrae rondom Jamie en dit wat tussen hulle gebeur, is pas beantwoord.

Die emosie tussen hulle is definitief nié sy verbeelding nie.

## Chapter SEVENTEEN

Jamie stood with her face against the door until she heard Clay drive away. What had she done? Opening up to him in the dark foyer, practically begging him for a hug? How could she be so shameless? Here in her own house, the place she'd shared with Jake? And what did Clay think, now that she'd practically thrown herself at him?

She rubbed her hands along her arms. Dirty, that's what she felt. Dirty and cheap and completely disloyal to Jake. It was one thing to invite Clay over, to give him dinner and play backgammon with him. But the hug at the end was over the top.

Even if she didn't have Jake's memory to protect, she'd acted too quickly. Still...that was the strange thing about Clay. He seemed so familiar, already so much a part of her life.

She drew a long breath, then made her way through the house turning off lights and locking doors—what used to be Jake's nighttime ritual. Finally she pushed herself up the stairs to the bedroom. No matter if Clay felt familiar or not, she'd acted inappropriately. Guilt and embarrassment mixed in her gut and shot through her heart, leaving her cheeks hot.

While she brushed her teeth, she could only stare at her reflection. What was *wrong* with her? How could she have changed so quickly, let go of the past in a forty-eight-hour window? And what about Aaron? No one would ever understand her loss the way Aaron did. Because it was his loss too, they forever shared a connection. But Clay? He was sympathetic, of course, but he'd never known Jake, could never understand the relationship she'd shared with him.

It was all so confusing.

She rinsed her toothbrush and set it back on the charger. The best idea was to forget about both of them, Aaron *and* Clay. All she needed was God and Sierra and memories of Jake. That was more than enough to get her through life until she could be with her husband again. She would work at

St. Paul's, and when the new Twin Towers were built, she would apply for a position at the official memorial.

If she spent her life helping the victims of September 11, she would be honoring Jake's memory and never—not ever again—would she suffer the horrible pangs of regret that jabbed her now. She gripped the bathroom counter and hung her head. *God...I'm sorry. I acted on my feelings, but it was wrong. I know it was wrong. Help me to live a life that would please You and Jake and Sierra. And help me keep my distance from Clay Miles.*

She looked up and her eyes fell on a small wooden plaque, one that had hung in her bathroom since her first birthday after Jake died. It had been a gift from her friend, Sue Henning.

"I bought us each one," she told Jamie at the time, "because there'll be days when we can't leave home without remembering the message written there."

Jamie looked at it now, studied it, and a chill ran down her neck and arms. The words were from the Bible. They read, *Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight.* Beneath that it said, *Proverbs 3:5–6.*

Her path felt crooked, for sure, after the evening with Clay, after their hug. If she was honest with herself, she wanted to kiss him. But how *could* she, when in her heart she was still married to Jake?

The Bible words gave her a different perspective, a peace. Never mind about Clay or Aaron or any of the emotions churning up her soul. Don't try to figure it out. Rather trust God. He'd take care of making her paths straight; that was His promise. That's what He was telling her, wasn't it?

She straightened and headed into the bedroom.

Tonight she needed more than a single Bible verse. She wanted to get lost in Scripture, to swim through the verses and chapters until she found the safe harbor she desperately needed.



Jake's Bible was on the dresser—where it always was. She picked it up, dropped into the nearest chair, and flipped it open. Some nights she used a study guide and read specific parts of Scripture. Other times, like tonight, she flipped through until something caught her eye. Jake had read this Bible thoroughly, and nearly every book was replete with highlighted sections, underlined verses, and notes written in the margins.

Jamie started at the beginning and thumbed through the books of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers, passing various highlighted areas. But as she passed over Deuteronomy, something caught her attention.

It was her name; she was sure of it. Her name in a part of the Bible she'd never read before. She flipped back, turning the pages until she saw it again, scrawled in Jake's printing above Deuteronomy, [chapter 30](#). Jake had drawn a line from her name to a section of Scripture that read, "I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live."

Next to the text Jake had written this:

*Jamie, this is for you. If I could get anything into your head, your heart, it would be that one point. Choose life, Jamie. Whenever you have the chance, choose life.*

Choose life?

She read his words again and again and one more time before her tears blurred the letters. Sweet Jake, still lending her his wisdom and understanding. But what did it mean? She sniffed and wiped at her eyes. Then she started at the beginning of the thirtieth chapter of Deuteronomy and began to read.

Clearly the story was about God's people on their journey to the Promised Land. Jamie remembered hearing a sermon series on the topic at church the year after Jake's death. [Chapter 30](#) told the people that God was giving them a choice. Choose His ways, His truth, His leading, and they would be choosing blessings and prosperity. Choose their own ignorant,

prideful ways, the ways of idols or false gods, and they would be choosing destruction and curses.

Jamie stored the words in her heart as she finished the chapter. Yes, that's what it meant. Life or death—the choice belonged to God's people back then much as it belonged to every person born on earth. Choose God, choose life. Choose an alternate way, choose death.

*Jamie, this is for you. If I could get anything into your head, your heart, it would be that one point. Choose life, Jamie. Whenever you have the chance, choose life.*

Jake's words had been aimed straight at her lack of faith.

An ache started in her chest and consumed her heart and soul. She hugged the Bible's open pages close.

Jake had loved her with a love so great it could only have come from God. A love that left her to make her own decision. But not until she had a chance to read his Bible did she understand the angst she'd caused him. He prayed daily for her eyes to be opened, for his faith to become real to her.

That's why it hurt so much now.

Jake died longing for one thing—the chance to share his faith with her. Yes, God answered his prayers. Through his journal, his Bible, through the confusion of trying to teach a stranger to be her husband, God answered Jake's prayers. She found God and she would hold on to Him until her dying day.

But she never got to share Him with Jake.

The enormity of all she had cost the two of them had never been more clear. She'd missed the intimacy of praying with her husband, missed holding his hands and coming before their God with a single heart, single purpose. She'd missed looking into Jake's eyes and seeing the love of Christ reflected there. Sure, she'd seen love in his eyes. Every time he looked at her, she saw love. But not God's love, because she wasn't aware of that sort of love. A deeper love, a bond that could only come through shared faith.

She'd missed all of it because of her stubborn pride.

Faith in Christ was the most important thing to Jake Bryan, and she'd missed the chance to understand that, to connect with him on that eternal level. She'd missed it and there wasn't a thing she could do about it.

A canyon of sorrow cut through her heart. If only she could have one day to hold him again, look into his eyes, his soul, and tell him that she had done what he'd asked of her. She had chosen God's life. One time to share the intimate bond of faith, an intimacy that would've made them even closer, more connected.

But it was a closeness she'd never know with Jake, and the truth of that pushed the canyon deeper until she could feel her heart breaking. For a long time she let the tears come, sadness that hadn't taken the form of weeping for months.

Eventually her sobs subsided, and she blinked so she could see clearly. Then she lowered the Bible and read the underlined part once more.

*I set before you life or death...choose life.*

*Choose life...*

Bit by bit, realization formed. She'd made the choice for life when it came to Jesus. But what about the way she *lived* her life?

Images flashed at her, the days and months she'd spent at St. Paul's, the conversations with Aaron about keeping the memory of September 11 fresh in the minds of people, helping the country to never forget. Then she heard Sierra's innocent voice telling her she looked happy today, but not usually. Usually after her volunteer work she looked sad.

How could she have been so blind? She'd surrounded herself with death and destruction ever since Jake died. Talking about the dead, remembering the dead, commemorating the dead, honoring the dead. Reliving the destruction, imagining the destruction, putting herself next to Jake amid the destruction, staring at the place where the destruction happened.

It consumed her.

Not that working at St. Paul's was a bad thing. They needed volunteers, and her time there had been a necessary part of her healing.

She closed her eyes. What was the prayer she'd said in the bathroom a few minutes ago? *Help me live a life that would please You and Jake and Sierra?* Wasn't that it? Then she walks in, flips open Jake's Bible, and reads a verse about choosing life?

Another chill worked its way down her spine.

Was it an answer from God? Was He telling her she'd spent enough time living in a cemetery, existing in a memorial? Was God giving her permission to move on, to choose life?

She read her husband's words again and for a moment she could see him standing before her, smiling at her, running his thumb beneath her eyes to dry her tears. "Jake..."

His name hung in the air and the image of him faded.

All this time she'd volunteered at St. Paul's so she could feel closer to him, closer to his memory. She'd done it to honor him and make him proud, because it was the sort of thing he would've done.

But not for two years straight.

The truth was suddenly clearer than air. Jake embraced life, lived it to the full without fear or doubt. He woke up each morning praising God and loving his family, and headed to work with a full heart. Always he had known he might die on the job, but the fact had never stopped him. The windy possibility of death had never so much as dimmed the brilliant candle that was Jake Bryan's life.

Maybe she'd acted too quickly that night by hugging Clay; maybe it would be years before she was ready to fall in love with someone new. But if Jake were standing here now he would tell her it was time to step out of the darkness, time to turn away from death and destruction.

Time to choose life.

Now Jamie had only one question for God. How? She dug her elbows

into her knees. Should she leave St. Paul's? Invest her time somewhere other than memorializing the victims of September 11?

Find someone new to share her life?

The options were overwhelming.

She stood and set the Bible back on the dresser. Maybe she should call Sue, ask her what she thought of the verse. It was late, but Sue was a night owl. She'd still be up. Jamie was about to pick up the phone when it rang. The unexpected sound of it made her jump back.

Caller ID told her it was from a cell phone. Clay Miles. It couldn't be anyone else.

She picked up the receiver. "Hello?"

"Hi." The smile in his voice sounded over the phone lines. "I know it's late, but I had two things."

"Okay." She felt herself smile, felt her eyes lighten and the burden lift from her shoulders. "Tell me."

"First, I got a call from one of the guys on the department. He had a bunch of Broadway tickets donated to the police force; they had three left for *The Lion King*, and I snagged 'em. It's Friday night. I thought you and Sierra might want to join me."

"*Lion King*? At the Amsterdam Theater?" Four different times Jamie had looked into tickets for Sierra, but the show was sold out months in advance. "Are you kidding?"

"Serious. They're orchestra level, ten rows from the stage."

"Clay!" She did a light scream. "Sierra will flip!"

He laughed. "I had a feeling. How about we head into the city about five o'clock. That way we can get some pizza before the show. Sound like a plan?"

Jake's words came flying at her. *Choose life, Jamie...whenever you have the chance, choose life.* "Yes, Clay." Happy tears stung at her eyes and she swallowed against the thickness in her throat. "A wonderful plan."

They made a decision to have lunch the next day, then hung up. Jamie

stared out the bedroom window at the shadowy bare trees, swaying in the early winter night. The timing of Clay's call was unbelievable. There she'd been, overwhelmed with the idea of choosing life, of moving on. What did it look like and where should she start? She smiled, the tide of sorrow waning. Most of her questions were still unanswered, but at least she knew what she was going to do first.

She would take in *The Lion King* on Broadway with Clay and Sierra.

God would show her what to do after that.

## Sewentien

Jamie staan met haar gesig teen die deur totdat sy Clay se motor hoor wegry. Wat het sy aangevang? Wat het haar besiel om in die donker portaal teenoor hom oop te maak en hom as't ware te smee om haar vas te hou? Hoe kon sy so skaamteloos wees? Hier in die huis wat sy met Jake gedeel het? En wat dink Clay nou dat sy feitlik in sy skoot geval het?

Sy vryf oor haar arms. Vuil, dis hoe sy voel. Vuil en goedkoop en dislojaal teenoor Jake. Dis een ding om Clay vir ete te nooi en saam met hom backgammon te speel. Maar met die omhelsing aan die einde van die aand het sy te ver gegaan.

Selfs al was dit nie vir Jake nie, het sy oorhaastig opgetree. En tog ... dis wat so vreemd is van Clay. Hy voel so bekend, reeds so deel van haar lewe.

Sy haal diep asem voordat sy deur die huis loop en ligte afskakel en deure sluit – alles wat Jake altyd gedoen het voordat hulle gaan slaap het. Uiteindelik gaan sy boontoe. Of Clay nou bekend voel of nie, sy het onbetaamlik opgetree. Sy voel skuldig en verleë, en die skaamte skroei warm deur haar hart en wange.

Sy kyk krities na haar weerkaatsing terwyl sy tande borsel. Wat is fôút met haar? Hoe kon sy so gou verander het; hoe kon sy haarself binne 'n kwessie van agt-en-veertig uur van die verlede losgemaak het? En wat van Aaron? Niemand sal ooit dieselfde begrip vir haar verlies kan hê nie. Want dis ook sy verlies, 'n band wat vir altyd tussen hulle sal wees. Maar Clay? Hy is vanselfsprekend simpatiek, maar hy het Jake nooit geken nie, sal nooit regtig verstaan wat daar tussen hulle was nie. Sy voel heeltemal verward.

Sy spoel haar mond uit. Dalk moet sy eenvoudig van hulle albei vergeet. Van Aaron én Clay. Al wat sy nodig het, is God en Sierra en haar herinneringe aan Jake. Dis meer as genoeg om haar te dra totdat sy eendag weer by haar man sal wees. Sy kan by St. Paul's werk en wanneer die nuwe torings gebou word, sal sy aansoek doen vir 'n pos by die amptelike museum.

As sy haar lewe daaraan wy om die slagoffers van 11 September te help, sal sy Jake se nagedagtenis lewend hou en nooit ooit weer die aaklige verwyte ervaar wat haar nou teister nie. Sy hou aan die rand van die wasbak vas en laat sak haar kop. *Here ... ek's jammer. Ek het my deur my emosies laat lei, en dit was verkeerd. Ek weet dit was verkeerd. Help my om 'n lewe te lei wat U en Jake en Sierra sal gelukkig maak. En help my om van Clay Miles af weg te bly.*

Sy kyk op en sien 'n klein houtbordjie, een wat al sedert haar eerste verjaarsdag ná Jake se dood in haar badkamer hang. Sue Henning het dit as geskenk vir haar gegee.

*Nou kyk sy daarna en 'n rilling gaan teen haar nek en arms af. Die bekende woorde kom uit die Bybel: Vertrou volkome op die Here en moenie op jou eie insigte staatmaak nie. Ken Hom in alles wat jy doen en Hy sal jou die regte pad laat loop. Onderaan staan: Spreuke 3:5-6.*

Haar pad voel krom en skeef. Veral ná die aand saam met Clay, nadat hulle mekaar vasgehou het. As sy doodeerlik moet wees, wou sy hom gesoen het. Maar hoe kán sy as sy in haar hart steeds met Jake getroud is?

Die teksvers bring 'n nuwe perspektief, 'n vrede. Sy hoef haar nie oor Clay en Aaron en die warboel emosies te ontstel nie. Sy moet dit nie probeer verstaan nie. Sy moet net op die Here vertrou. Hy sal haar die regte pad laat loop; dit is sy belofte. Dis wat Hy pas vir haar gesê het.

Sy kom orent en loop kamer toe.

Vanaand het sy meer as net een Bybelvers nodig. Sy wil haar in die Woord verdiep, wil haar in die verse en hoofstukke begrawe totdat sy die veilige hawe ontdek wat sy so bitter nodig het.

Jake se Bybel is op die spieëlkas. Sy gaan haal dit, sak op die naaste stoel neer en slaan dit oop. Soms gebruik sy 'n studiegids en lees spesifieke gedeeltes. Ander kere, soos vanaand, blaai sy rond totdat iets haar oog vang. Jake het sy Bybel deeglik gelees, en amper elke boek is vol onderstreepte verse en sy eie kantaantekeninge.

Jamie begin voor en blaai vinnig deur Genesis, Eksodus, Levitikus, Numeri, verby sekere ingekleurde gedeeltes. Maar in Deuteronomium vang iets haar oog.

Dis haar naam; sy is seker daarvan. Haar naam in 'n deel van die Bybel wat sy nog nooit voorheen gelees het nie. Sy blaai terug totdat sy dit kry. Jake het dit bo-aan die dertigste hoofstuk neergeskribbel. Hy het 'n streep van haar naam af getrek tot by 'n gedeelte wat lees: "Ek het die lewe en die dood aan jou voorgehou, die seën en die straf. Kies die lewe, sodat jy en jou nageslag kan lewe."

Langsaan het Jake die volgende geskryf:

*Jamie, hierdie gedeelte is vir jou. As ek enigiets in jou kop, jou hart kan laat vassteek, sal dit hierdie woorde wees. Kies die lewe, Jamie. Wanneer jy die kans het, kies die lewe.*

Kies die lewe?

Sy lees sy woorde oor en oor en oor totdat sy nie meer deur haar trane kan sien nie. Hoe kosbaar dat sy steeds deur Jake se wysheid en begrip bedien word. Maar wat beteken dit? Sy snuif en vee haar trane af. Dan gaan sy terug na die begin van die dertigste hoofstuk en begin lees.

Die verhaal handel oor God se volk op hulle reis na die beloofde land. Kort na Jake se dood het Jamie 'n reeks preke oor die onderwerp gehoor. In hoofstuk 30 stel die Here sy volk voor 'n keuse. As hulle sy weë, sy waarheid, sy leiding kies, sal hulle seën en voorspoed ontvang. As die volk hulle deur hulle eie dwaasheid en trots laat lei en die weg van afgodsbeelde en valse gode kies, sal hulle verwoesting en vloeke ontvang.

Jamie lees die hoofstuk klaar en bêre die woorde diep in haar hart. Nou verstaan sy. Lewe of dood. Elke mens op aarde kom steeds voor die keuse te staan wat God destyds aan sy volk voorgehou het. Kies God, kies die lewe. Kies jou eie pad, kies die dood.

*Jamie, hierdie gedeelte is vir jou. As ek enigiets in jou kop, jou hart kan laat vassteek, sal dit hierdie woorde wees. Kies die lewe, Jamie. Wanneer jy die kans het, kies die lewe.*

Jake se woorde was direk op haar ongeloof gerig.

'n Pyn begin in haar bors en versprei verterend deur haar hart en siel. Sy maak die Bybel toe.

Jake se liefde vir haar was so groot dat dit net van God af kon kom. 'n Liefde wat haar die ruimte gegun het om haar eie keuse te maak. Maar dit was eers toe Jamie sy Bybel begin lees dat sy besef het hoeveel angs sy by hom veroorsaak het. Hy het daaglikse gebed dat haar oë sou oopgaan, dat sy geloof ook vir haar 'n realiteit sou word.

Dis waarom dit nou so seer is.

Jake het met een begeerte gesterf – die kans om saam met haar die Here te dien. Ja, God het sy gebede verhoor. Deur sy joernaal, sy Bybel en deur haar verwarring toe sy 'n vreemdeling probeer leer het om haar man te word, het sy die Here ontmoet. Sy het die Here gevind en sy sal Hom nooit weer laat gaan nie.

Maar sy het nooit die geleentheid gehad om Hom saam met Jake te dien nie.

Die omvang van alles wat haar ongeloof hulle twee gekos het, was nog nooit so duidelik nie. Sy het die intieme geleentheid verbeur om saam met hom te bid, om sy hande vas te hou en met 'n onverdeelde hart voor die Here te kom. Sy het nooit in Jake se oë gekyk en God se liefde daarin gesien nie. Natuurlik het sy sy liefde in sy oë gesien. Elke keer wanneer hy na haar gekyk het, het sy sy liefde gesien. Maar nie God se liefde nie, want sy was blind vir daardie soort liefde. 'n Dieper liefde, 'n band wat net deur 'n gemeenskaplike geloof gesmee kan word.

Haar hardnekkige trots het gemaak dat sy al hierdie dinge verbeur het.

Daar was vir Jake Bryan niks belangriker as sy geloof in Christus nie, en sy het nie die geleentheid gehad om dit te verstaan of sy ewigheidsperspektief te



deel nie. Sy het dit verbeur en daar is niks wat sy daaraan kan doen nie. Die seer kloof deur haar hart. As sy maar net een dag kon hê om hom weer vas te hou, in sy oë en hart te kyk en vir hom te sê sy het gedoen wat hy van haar gevra het. Sy het God se lewe gekies. Een geleentheid om die geloofsband en intimiteit te deel wat hulle selfs nog nader aan mekaar sou bring.

Maar dis 'n nabyheid wat sy nooit met Jake ervaar het nie, en hierdie realiteit breek haar hart. Vir 'n lang ruk laat sy haar trane kom, 'n hartseer waaraan sy maande lank nie uiting gegee het nie.

Toe haar snikke uiteindelik bedaar, knip sy haar oë totdat sy duidelik kan sien. Dan laat sak sy die Bybel en kyk weer na die onderstreepte gedeelte.

*Ek het die lewe en die dood aan jou voorgehou ... kies die lewe.*

*Kies die lewe ...*

Stukkies vir stukkies daag die besef by haar. Sy het die lewe gekies toe sy Jesus aangeneem het. Maar wat van die manier waarop sy haar lewe lééf?

Beelde van die dae en maande wat sy by St. Paul's deurgebring het, verskyn voor haar, die gesprekke met Aaron oor hoe om die nagedagtenis van 11 September lewend te hou, die land te help onthou. Toe hoor sy Sierra se onskuldige stemmetjie wat sê dat sy vandag bly lyk, maar nie gewoonlik nie. Ná sy by die kapel uitgehelp het, lyk sy gewoonlik hartseer.

Hoe kon sy so blind gewees het? Sedert Jake se dood het sy haarself met die dood en verwoesting omring. Sy praat oor die dooies, onthou die dooies, gedenk die dooies, eer die dooies. Sy herleef die verwoesting, dink aan die verwoesting, plaas haarself langs Jake in die verwoesting, staar na die plek waar die verwoesting plaasgevind het.

Dit verteer haar.

Nie dat dit sleg is om by St. Paul's te werk nie. Hulle het vrywilligers nodig, en haar tyd daar was 'n noodsaaklike deel van haar genesing.

Sy maak haar oë toe. Wat het sy 'n paar minute gelede in die badkamer gebid? *Help my om 'n lewe te lei wat U en Jake en Sierra sal gelukkig maak?* En net daarna maak sy Jake se Bybel oop en lees 'n vers wat haar aanspoor om die lewe te kies?

Sy voel nog 'n rilling deur haar gaan.

Is dit God se antwoord? Sê Hy vir haar dat sy lank genoeg in 'n begraafplaas, 'n monument geleef het? Gee Hy haar toestemming om oor te begin, om die lewe te kies?

Sy lees weer wat haar man geskryf het en vir 'n oomblik is dit asof hy voor haar staan, sien sy hoe hy vir haar glimlag en haar trane met sy duim afvee. "Jake ..."

Sy naam hang in die lug en die beeld vervaag.

Sy was vir so lank 'n vrywilliger by St. Paul's sodat sy nader aan hom kon voel. Sy het dit gedoen om sy werk voort te sit en hom trots te maak, want dis die soort ding wat hy sou doen.

Maar nie twee jaar aaneen nie.

Die waarheid is skielik kristalhelder. Jake het die lewe aangegryp; hy het voluit geleef, sonder vrees of onsekerheid. Hy het elke oggend wakker geword en die Here geprys, sy gesin liefgehad en met 'n vol hart werk toe gegaan. Hy het altyd geweet dat sy lewe daaglik op die spel was, maar dit het hom nooit gekeer nie. Die moontlikheid van die dood kon niks doen om die vlam van Jake se lewe uit te doof nie.

Dalk het sy oorhaastig opgetree toe sy Clay vanaand 'n drukkies gegee het, dalk sal dit jare wees voordat sy weer gereed is om iemand anders lief te kry. Maar as Jake nou hier was, sou hy vir haar gesê het dis tyd om uit die donkerte te kom en om haar rug op die dood en verwoesting te draai.

Tyd om die lewe te kies.

Nou het Jamie net een vraag vir die Here. Hoe? Sy stut haar elmboë op haar knieë. Moet sy weggaan by St. Paul's? Ophou om haar tyd aan die nagedagtenis van die slagoffers van 11 September te wy?

Haar lewe met iemand nuut deel?

Die opsies is oorweldigend.

Sy staan op en sit die Bybel weer op die kas. Dalk moet sy vir Sue bel, haar vra wat sy van die vers dink. Dis laat, maar Sue is 'n naguil. Sy sal nog nie slaap nie. Jamie is op die punt om die telefoon op te tel toe dit lui. Die onverwagse geluid laat haar wip.

Sy kan sien dat die oproep van 'n selfoon af gemaak word. Clay Miles. Dit kan niemand anders wees nie.

Sy tel op. "Hallo?"

"Haai." Sy kan hom hoor glimlag. "Ek weet dis laat, maar daar is twee dinge wat ek wil sê."

"Oukei." Sy kan voel hoe sy glimlag, hoe haar oë verhelder en die las van haar skouers opgelig word. "Ek luister."

"Eerstens het een van die ouens van die departement my gebel. Iemand het 'n klomp Broadway-kaartjies aan die polisie geskenk; daar was nog drie oor vir *The Lion King* en ek het hulle opgeraap. Dis vir Vrydagaand. Ek het gewonder of jy en Sierra nie saam met my wil gaan kyk nie."

"*The Lion King*? By die Amsterdamteater?" Jamie het al by vier geleenthede gaan kyk of sy nie vir Sierra kon kaartjies kry nie, maar die vertoning is maande vooruit vol bespreek. "Jy speel seker!"

"Ek's ernstig. Ons sit onder, tien rye van die verhoog af."

"Clay!" Sy gee 'n gilletjie. "Sierra gaan in die wolke wees!"

Hy lag. "Ek't nogal so 'n gevoel gehad. Ek't gedink ons kan dalk so vyf uur ingaan stad toe. Dan kan ons sommer voor die tyd gaan pizza eet. Wat sê jy?"

Jake se woorde kom sonder waarskuwing. *Kies die lewe, Jamie. Wanneer jy die kans het, kies die lewe.* "Ja, Clay." Gelukkige trane brand in haar oë en sy sluk verby die knop in haar keel. "Dit klink heerlik."

Hulle besluit dat hulle mekaar die volgende dag vir middagete sal kry en lui af. Jamie staan deur die kamervenster na die skaduagtige kaal bome wat liggies in die winterdag wieg. Die tydskerekening van Clay se oproep was

ongelooflik. Net toe sy met die telefoon in haar hand staan, oorweldig deur die idee dat sy die lewe moet kies en opnuut moet begin. Hoe lyk hierdie lewe en waar moet sy begin? Sy glimlag en voel hoe die hartseer van vroeër vervloei. Die meeste van haar vrae is steeds onbeantwoord, maar ten minste weet sy wat sy heel eerste gaan doen.

Sy gaan *The Lion King* op Broadway kyk saam met Clay en Sierra.

God sal haar wys wat daarna moet gebeur.

# Chapter EIGHTEEN

Sierra had barely enough time to talk to God when she got home from school.

Clay was taking them to *Lion King!* The real live *Lion King!* She bounced into her bedroom and found Wrinkles on her bed.

“Wrinkles, guess what?”

The cat yawned and stretched out his skinny arms. He didn’t look that interested. Sierra dropped down on the edge and rubbed the soft fur between his ears. “Clay’s taking us to *Lion King*, can you believe it?”

Wrinkles looked at her and blinked. Sierra did a big breath because maybe that cat was jealous. Or maybe he didn’t understand. But God would, so she closed her eyes super-duper tight and tried to be serious. Only instead a squeally sort of laugh came from her mouth, so she jumped up and danced around the room until she bumped into the wall.

Then she settled down. *Settle down* is what Mommy said when she had a little too much energy. “God...Clay’s taking us to *Lion King!* Isn’t that the bestest news in the whole wide world?”

Of course God didn’t talk to her like her friend, Katy, or like her mommy would. But she could feel Him listening all the same. She licked her dry lips and did a smaller, shorter dance. “I think I like that Clay, God. Thanks for letting him meet Mommy on the boat when he saved her life from the bad guys.”

She opened her eyes and gasped. She didn’t have a nice dress picked out yet, and Mommy said to hurry. The closet had six nice dresses in it, so she picked out the frilliest and prettiest one, the one with blue and white and ruffles and a big bow in the back. Then her white socks with the lacy tops, the ones Wrinkles wore the other day.

Speedy fast she was ready and running down the stairs. That’s when she stopped, because Clay was already there and he and Mommy were smiling at each other. Real quick she added a P.S. for God, because she had

something else to say. But this time she said it in her head so Mommy and Clay wouldn't hear her. *God...I know Clay lives in California, but maybe he could change his mind and live here. Because he would make a nice second daddy, don't You think? A second daddy like James has? Please think about it, God. Thanks.*

Clay looked up at her. "Don't you look pretty."

"Thank you." She did a curtsy, the kind she and her mommy did when they played princess. "And you look like Prince Charming." He really did. He was tall and he had blond hair and his eyes looked like Prince Charming in the movie.

Clay did a prince-type bow and smiled at her. "That's very nice of you, Sierra."

Her mommy covered her mouth and laughed. Then she made smiling eyes at Sierra and said it was time to go. The trip into the city was the longest in the world. It felt like the week before Christmas because it lasted forever. But finally they ate their pizza and took a cab to the theater and went inside. The theater was the prettiest place in the world, with fancy decorations on the walls and ceilings and even the floor and seats.

They walked down toward the front until Mommy said, "This is it."

Sierra went down the row first, then Mommy, then Clay. She wanted to stand up and dance around a little because this was the real *Lion King*! Instead her stomach did the dance by itself, twisting and jumping and proving how much excitement she had inside her. Plus also her head and shoulders did some moving and turning and looking at the other people and then her knees got involved.

Mommy leaned close to her. "Sit still, Sierra. Young ladies sit still at the theater."

Sierra already knew that because Mommy took her here to see *Annie* once. But because of *Lion King* getting ready to start, she forgot. "Okay, Mommy. Sorry."

"It's okay." Her mommy smiled. "You're excited."

“I’m *so* excited, Mommy. My tummy and head and shoulders and even my knees are excited.”

Clay leaned over Mommy’s legs. “That’s exactly how I feel.” He gave a nice nod, then he looked at Mommy. “I might need a reminder about sitting still too.”

Sierra giggled, and just then the lights went out. A squeal started to come from her mouth, but she smacked her hand over her lips and looked at her mother with a quick look that said she wouldn’t squeal again. Promise.

But she definitely did a lot of gasps.

The giraffes came up the aisles around them, and the lions covered the stage, and painted people were singing in the trees, and more of them from someplace near the ceiling, and it was all so amazing she could hardly stand it. A dancing person started singing “Circle of Life,” and that’s when the most amazing thing of all happened.

In the corner of her eyeball she saw Clay holding Mommy’s hand. And that’s when she was sure she would remember this night all the way until forever.

The moment Clay arrived at her house, Jamie knew the truth. No matter what she’d told herself the night before about jumping in too quickly or being ashamed of herself for her attraction to him, seeing him in person told the real story.

There was no turning back.

If she was going to choose life, if she was going to embrace it, then she couldn’t berate herself for hugging a man whose company she enjoyed. Never mind whether they ever saw each other again after these three weeks, for now all she wanted was to be with him. When he walked through the door, their eyes met. They stood there, looking at each other. Then—almost in slow motion—they came together in another hug. Not the sorrowful hug of the night before, but a hug of friendship and promise and

something that defied time and reason.

A hug she neither regretted nor wanted to end.

Conversation had been light and upbeat since then, with Sierra providing the main source of dialogue. From her perspective, everything about the city was super bright and super busy and super big. She talked about all of it right until they took their seats.

It was when the music started, when the fullness of it surrounded them and swept them away on the story, that Clay reached out and took her hand. At first she expected him to squeeze her fingers or pat them, his way of telling her he was glad they were getting a chance to see the show, glad they were together.

But then he eased his fingers between hers, and the sensation sent a tingling feeling all the way to her knees. She was afraid to look at him, afraid the emotions tossing her soul around would be too transparent. Instead she focused on the way her fingers felt against his, the warmth of his large hand covering her smaller one.

The play was amazing.

She'd heard people say that *The Lion King* was in its own category theatrically, that nothing compared to it, and they were right. The costumes, the singing, the sets, it was more than Jamie could've imagined. Once in a while she looked at Sierra, and always her daughter's eyes were wide and dancing, her mouth slightly open. She neither talked nor fidgeted, mesmerized by the experience.

And through it all, Clay held her hand.

At the part where Simba, the young lion king, meets up with his old childhood girlfriend, Nala, and the two sing about feeling the love in the air that night, Clay ran his thumb over hers. Tears stung at Jamie's eyes, though she wasn't sure why. Whether it was because she and Jake had been childhood friends...or because that very night love, or something like it, was indeed in the air. And it had nothing to do with Jake.

Then when Mufasa's memory spoke to Simba, Jamie felt tears again.

The message was the same as what she'd read in Deuteronomy. What Jake had written to her in the margins of his Bible. Loss was part of the package of living, but the fighter remains. He fights the good fight, he gets back in the ring, he never gives up.

He chooses life.

Jamie's heart almost broke when the play ended. Not because the story was so moving, so brilliantly performed. But because when the lights went up, Clay released her hand. Probably for Sierra's benefit. The two of them hadn't had time to talk about what was happening between them, let alone involve Sierra.

On the way home she was more aware of him, the way he walked beside her, his arm brushing against hers, how he sat next to her in the cab, their legs touching. Once in a while she'd catch him watching her. Their eyes would meet and hold, and she'd feel the tingling again, a floating sensation that made her look down to see if her feet were still on the ground.

Back at the house, they went through the nighttime ritual with Sierra, and this time Clay took her hand and Sierra's and offered to pray.

"God, thank You for a wonderful night. Thanks for singing and music and drama." He paused. "And stories that touch our hearts."

Jamie was supposed to have her eyes closed, but she couldn't. She kept them open just enough so she could watch Clay, the way he bowed his head and prayed so easily, with a heart for God alone. She'd missed this with Jake, the praying. The thought shot a quick burst of pain into her heart, but it faded as Clay continued.

"You have a plan for each of us. A good plan. Help us keep our eyes open so we won't miss it. Thank You, Lord. Amen."

Her heart skipped a beat. *Help us keep our eyes open so we won't miss it?* Was he talking about her, the two of them? She didn't ask, and a few minutes later they were downstairs fixing snacks.

The atmosphere remained easy, uncomplicated throughout the



evening. They watched country music videos and played backgammon—with Clay winning five out of seven. Jamie told him that Wanda had called her the night before. Joe finally had a chance to meet her children, and when he saw her little boy he broke down.

“I guess he looks exactly like the boy they lost.” Jamie bit her lip. “The kids went upstairs, and Joe wept. The thing was, Wanda didn’t know what to do with him. She hadn’t drawn comfort from him when their son was killed, and now she didn’t know how to give him comfort.”

Clay frowned. “Tough for both of them.”

“But get this.” Jamie dropped the dice she’d been fiddling with, her eyes locked on his. “Joe apologized. He sat her down and even through his tears he told her he was sorry for walking out, for not being there for her when she needed him most.”

“Wow.” Clay crossed his arms. “God’s doing something between those two.”

“Definitely.” She looked at the game board. “But I guess he left with things still awkward. Wanda asked me to pray for something to happen, something that will help them break the bonds of the past so they can find a new way to relate to each other.”

The conversation switched to the carjacker Clay had to shoot, and a handful of other calls—gang fights and domestic violence and drug busts—runs that had taken all of his training to pull off.

It was the first time Jamie considered the danger of his job. Just as dangerous as Jake’s had been—more so, in some ways.

Her reaction was proof she was different now; she wasn’t afraid for him. Whether he remained her friend or something more, she would never again live in fear for the safety of someone she cared about. Besides, like Jake, Clay loved God. And that was enough. Every day when he hit the streets he put on two kinds of armor. His bulletproof vest, and the armor of God.

Fear couldn’t add anything to that.

He closed the game board and dug his shoulder into the back of the sofa. "So tell me about you, Jamie. Other than St. Paul's and playing dress-up, what do you do? Hobbies? Sports? Jester training?"

She giggled. "Definitely jester training." Her smile eased. The question was harder than it seemed. What did she do with her time, after all? "I like to jet ski." An image of Jake and her flying across the water filled her mind. She willed it to disappear. "And I used to take a ceramics class. You know, pottery, painting little statues, that kind of thing."

"Not anymore?" Clay angled his head, his expression mildly curious.

"No." She made a slight lift of her shoulders. "I haven't gotten back into it, I guess."

"What about the jet skiing?"

She looked at her hands. He wasn't probing, really. Just learning more about her, maybe learning more about how far she'd come since losing Jake. Her eyes met his again. "Not as much as before."

A knowing filled his eyes. "It was something you did with Jake?"

"Yes."

He winced a bit. "Sorry...I wasn't...I didn't mean to bring up something that..."

"Something about Jake?" Her heart hit another level of respect for the man across from her. On top of everything else, he was compassionate.

"I guess." He exhaled through pursed lips. "Sorry."

"Don't be." She hesitated. "For the rest of my life Jake's name will come up. It has to; I shared twenty years with him." Her voice softened. She was letting Clay see a part of her that few people saw. "At first, after September 11, I couldn't talk about him without breaking down." She tucked her feet beneath her. "What happened to Jake will always be sad, but I can talk about him now." She lifted the corners of her mouth. "Time does that to you."

"You loved him very much, didn't you?" He set the game board on the floor and slid closer.

“Yes.” She shifted her gaze to the chair across the room, the one that had been Jake’s. “His memory is always with me.” A Shania Twain song came on the television, a love song that lent an intimacy to the moment. She looked at him again. “And you, Clay? What hearts have you broken?”

“Not many.” He chuckled and shifted so his back was against the sofa. Only a few inches separated them. “The LA girls I’ve met don’t have hearts; just brains and beauty.”

“New Yorkers can be that way too.”

“I’m sure.” His laugh was slow and easy. “Actually, there was one girl, someone I met in high school.”

She studied him, the way his eyes didn’t change when he talked about the girl. Whoever she was, Jamie guessed she no longer had a hold on Clay Miles. “Did you date her?”

“No. We were friends. In fact—“ his light chuckle made her smile —“she married my brother.”

Jamie raised her eyebrows. “Really?”

“Yep.” He sounded comfortable, as if whatever pain had been involved no longer hurt him.

“Did it make things hard between you and your brother?”

“No.” Clay looked straight ahead at the wall. “My brother’s a nice guy. They’re happy together; she belongs with him. Besides...”

She waited, but when he didn’t finish his thought she had to know. “Besides what?”

He turned to her and searched her eyes. “She never made me feel like this.”

And there it was.

The admission they knew was coming. The special something that had been between them from the moment they met was now out in the open. Her pulse picked up speed. What was she supposed to do? How could she respond when she was blind as a bat in the ways of new love?

She looked down; her hands were trembling. “I...I’ve felt it since the

ferryboat.” Her eyes met his again. “I thought it was just me.”

“It’s not.” He took her hand, and worked his fingers between hers. “It’s crazy; I haven’t known you a week.” She understood the bafflement in his tone, felt it herself. “But I feel something with you I’ve never felt before.”

They were quiet for a while. Tim McGraw was singing something slow and pretty, and Jamie felt no need to talk. What would they say? Regardless of their feelings, he would go back to California in two weeks.

He spoke first. “I lay awake at night in the Holiday Inn wondering what I’m doing, what could come of this after only three weeks.” He gave her a crooked grin. “I guess that’s why I brought it up.”

“Mmmm.” She gave the back of his hand a gentle squeeze. Her heart still tore along, but no longer at breakneck speed. She was nervous, not sure where the conversation was going or whether she could bare her heart enough to tell him her true thoughts—that she struggled with feeling guilty because of Jake, that he would’ve wanted her to move on. “I’ve done my share of wondering.”

Clay released her hand and put his arm around her, positioning her so she could rest her head on his shoulder. “When I pray about it, I feel God’s hand on this—” he gestured to her and then back at himself—“whatever this is between us.” He held his breath for a moment. “I guess we need to let Him answer the other questions.”

“Exactly.” His statement was the perfect wrap-up for the night, a way to stop herself from overthinking the situation and let the night come to an end. She smiled at him, savoring the feel of her head on his shoulder. “Thanks for a great night.”

“Well...” He raised his brow in mock sarcasm. “We didn’t get to wear the hats, but still...” His eyes danced. “It was a pretty good night.”

He stood, helped her to her feet, and walked with her to the front door. His hug didn’t linger, didn’t suggest anything more than the closeness he’d already admitted to. When he was gone, she stared out the

window and watched his car pull away. She explored her feelings. No guilt. No shame.

Something was changing inside her.

Talking about their feelings had been a good thing. Neither of them was willing to rush ahead, to assume they should start a relationship simply because they shared a chemistry. In the meantime, they would enjoy the next two weeks and believe God had a plan for them. Whether that plan found them together.

Or apart.

## Agtien

Sierra het skaars genoeg tyd om met die Here te praat toe sy van die skool af kom.

Clay gaan hulle na *The Lion King* toe vat! Die rêrige-êrige *Lion King*! Sy bars by haar kamer in en kry Wrinkles op haar bed.

“Wrinkles, raai wat.”

Die kat gaap en strek sy voorpote uit. Hy lyk nie vreeslik geïnteresseerd nie. Sierra gaan sit op die rand van haar bed en vryf oor die sagte pels tussen sy ore. “Oom Clay gaan ons na *The Lion King* toe vat, kan jy dit glo?”

Wrinkles kyk na haar en knip sy oë. Sierra sug swaar. Dalk is die kat jaloers. Of dalk verstaan hy net nie. Maar die Here sal; daarom knyp sy haar oë baie styf toe en probeer ernstig wees. Maar ’n gelukkige gillettjie kom uit haar mond, en sy spring op en dans in die rondte totdat sy halfdronkerig voel.

Dan raak sy rustig. *Raak rustig* is wat Mamma sê wanneer sy ’n bietjie te veel energie het. “Jesus ... oom Clay gaan ons na *The Lion King* toe vat! Dis die heel beste nuus in die hele wêreld!”

Natuurlik praat God nie met haar soos haar maatjie, Katy, of soos haar Mamma nie. Maar sy kan voel Hy luister. Sy lek oor haar droë lippe en doen nog ’n dansie. “Ek dink ek hou van hierdie oom Clay, Here. Dankie dat hy Mamma op die boot ontmoet het toe hy haar van die slegte mense gered het.”

Sy maak haar oë oop en trek haar asem skerp in. Sy het nog nie ’n mooi rok uitgekies nie, en Mamma het gesê sy moet gou maak. Daar is ses mooi rokkies in die kas en nadat sy ’n bietjie gedink het, kies sy haar beste, mooiste een met blou en wit valletjies en ’n groot strik op die rug. Dan haar wit sokkies met die kanterige randjie wat Wrinkles nou die dag gedra het.

Nadat sy blitsvinnig aangetrek het, hardloop sy by die trap af. Halfpad steek sy vas, want Clay is klaar hier en hy en Mamma glimlag vir mekaar. Sy onthou skielik daar is nog iets wat sy vir die Here wil sê. Maar hierdie keer

praat sy in haar kop sodat Mamma en oom Clay haar nie sal hoor nie. *Jesus ... ek weet oom Clay bly in Kalifornië, maar dalk kan hy besluit om hier te kom bly. Dink U nie ook hy sal 'n baie goeie tweede pappa uitmaak nie? 'n Tweede pappa soos die een wat James het? Dink so 'n bietjie daaroor, Here. Dankie.*

Clay kyk op na haar. “Kyk net hoe mooi lyk jy.”

“Dankie.” Sy maak 'n kniebuiging, net soos wanneer sy en Mamma prinses speel. “En Oom lyk soos Prince Charming.” Sy jok nie. Hy is lank en het blonde hare en sy oë lyk soos Prince Charming s'n in die fliek.

Clay maak 'n koninklike buiging en glimlag vir haar. “Dis baie gaaf van jou, Sierra.”

Mamma hou haar hand voor haar mond en lag. Toe glimlag sy met haar oë vir Sierra en sê dis tyd om te ry. Dit het nog nooit so lank gevat om in die stad te kom nie. Dit voel soos die week voor Kersfees, want dit hou vir altyd aan. Maar uiteindelik eet hulle hulle pizza en ry met 'n taxi teater toe en gaan in. Die teater is die mooiste plek in die wêreld, met deftige versierings teen die mure en plafonne en selfs die vloer en sitplekke.

Hulle loop afdraande na die verhoog toe totdat Mamma sê: “Dis ons ry.”

Sierra gaan eerste by die ry in, dan Mamma, dan oom Clay. Sy wil opstaan en 'n dansie doen, want dis die regte *Lion King*! In plaas daarvan begin haar binnekant sy eie passie uitvoer; haar maag draai en bokspring van opgewondenheid. Ook haar kop en skouers wikkels en draai sodat sy na die ander mense kan kyk en toe begin haar knieë wip-wip.

Mamma leun oor. “Sit stil, Sierra. Jong dames sit stil by die teater.”

Sierra weet dit eintlik, want Mamma het haar eendag gebring om *Annie* te kom kyk. Maar omdat *The Lion King* gereed maak om te begin, het sy vergeet. “Oukei, Mamma. Jammer.”

“Dis oukei.” Haar mamma glimlag. “Jy's opgewonde.”

“Ek's baie opgewonde, Mamma. My lyf en kop en skouers én my knieë is opgewonde.”

Clay leun oor Mamma se bene. “Dis presies hoe ek voel.” Hy knik en kyk na Mamma. “Ek sal ook maar moet luister as jou ma praat.”

Sierra giggel en dit word donker. 'n Gilletjie begin uit haar keel kom, maar sy klap haar hand oor haar mond en gee Mamma 'n vinnige kyk om te sê sy sal nie weer gil nie. Belowe.

Maar af en toe trek sy haar asem baie hard in.

Die kameelperd kom in die paadjies langs hulle verby, en die verhoog is vol leeus, en geveerde mense sing in die bome en bo in die lug teen die plafon, en dis alles so wonderlik dat sy dit amper nie kan hou nie. 'n Danser begin “Circle of Life” sing, en dan gebeur die heel wonderlikste ding van die hele aand.

Uit die hoek van haar oog sien sy dat oom Clay Mamma se hand vashou. En dis toe dat sy seker is sy sal hierdie aand vir altyd en ewig onthou.

Die oomblik toe sy haar voordeur vir Clay oopmaak, weet sy dit. Al het sy

haarself die vorige aand oor haar oorhaastigheid kasty en haar vir haar aangetrokkenheid tot hom geskaam, verklap haar hart, noudat hy voor haar staan, die ware stand van sake. Sy is by omdraai verby.

As sy die lewe gaan kies, as sy dit gaan aangryp, dan kan sy haarself nie verwyt omdat sy 'n man wie se geselskap sy geniet 'n drukkies gegee het nie. Sy weet nie of hulle mekaar ooit weer na hierdie drie weke gaan sien nie, maar al wat sy nou wil doen, is by hom wees. Toe hy inkom, ontmoet hulle oë. Hulle staan vir 'n oomblik na mekaar en kyk. Dan – amper in stadige aksie – gee hulle mekaar 'n drukkies. Nie die hartseer drukkies van die vorige aand nie, maar 'n drukkies van vriendskap en belofte en iets wat sy nie kan peil nie. 'n Drukkies waaroor sy nie jammer is nie, een wat sy nie wil hê moet ophou nie.

Daarna het die aand lig en opgeruimd verloop, met Sierra wat as die primêre bron van dialoog optree. Vanuit haar perspektief is alles in die stad super helder, super besig en super groot. Sy hou eers op praat toe hulle gaan sit.

Dis toe die musiek begin, toe die grootsheid hulle omvou en meevoer, dat Clay haar hand neem. Eers dink sy hy gaan haar vingers net 'n drukkies gee, 'n manier om te wys dat hy bly is oor die kans om na die vertoning te kom kyk; bly dat hulle bymekaar is.

Maar toe vleg hy sy vingers deur hare, en die sensasie stuur 'n tinteling tot by haar knieë. Sy is bang om na hom te kyk, bang dat hy die emosie sal sien wat haar hart so op hol het. In plaas daarvan konsentreer sy op die gevoel van haar vingers teen syne, die warmte van sy groot hand oor hare.

Die vertoning is fantasties.

Sy het mense al hoor sê dat *The Lion King* in 'n klas van sy eie is, en hulle is reg. Die kostuums, sang, die stel, dis meer as wat Jamie haar kon indink. Af en toe dwaal haar oë na Sierra waar sy met groot, blink oë sit en kyk, haar mondjie effens oop. Sy is só betowerd dat sy nie een keer praat of vroetel nie. En Clay hou haar hand heelaand in syne.

Wanneer Simba, die jong leekoning, weer vir Nala, sy maatjie van kleintyd, ontmoet en hulle oor die liefde wat in die lug is, sing, streel Clay met sy duim oor hare. Trane brand in Jamie se oë, en sy is nie mooi seker waarom nie. Dalk omdat sy en Jake as kinders maatjies was ... of omdat daar vanaand inderdaad liefde, of iets soortgelyks, in die lug is. En dit het niks met Jake te doen nie.

Later weer, toe Mufasa se gees met Simba praat, voel Jamie opnuut haar trane. Dis dieselfde boodskap wat sy in Deuteronomium gelees het. Wat Jake in die kantlyn van sy Bybel vir haar geskryf het. Verlies is deel van die lewe, maar die oorwinnaar stry die goeie stryd, hy staan op, hy verloor nie hoop nie. Hy kies die lewe.

Jamie se hart wil amper breek toe die optrede verby is. Nie omdat die verhaal so ontroerend, so uitstekend opgevoer is nie. Maar omdat Clay haar hand laat gaan toe die ligte aangeskakel word. Waarskynlik ter wille van Sierra. Hulle het nog nie tyd gehad om met mekaar te praat oor wat tussen hulle gebeur nie,

laat staan nog met Sierra.

Op pad huis toe is sy nog meer bewus van hom, van sy arm wat terloops teen hare skuur terwyl hulle loop, van hulle bene wat in die taxi aan mekaar raak. Nou en dan betrap sy hom dat hy na haar kyk. Wanneer hulle oë dan vir 'n paar salige oomblikke ontmoet, ervaar sy weer die aangename tinteling, 'n swewende sensasie wat haar laat afkyk om te sien of haar voete steeds aan die grond raak.

By die huis gekom, volg hulle Sierra se slaaptydroetine, en hierdie keer is dit Clay wat haar en Sierra se hande neem en aanbied om te bid.

“Vader, dankie vir 'n wonderlike aand. Dankie vir sang en musiek en drama.”

Hy bly stil. “En stories wat ons harte raak.”

Jamie is veronderstel om haar oë toe te maak, maar sy kan nie. Sy hou hulle net oop genoeg om na Clay te kyk. Hy sit met 'n geboë hoof en bid met 'n gemaklikheid wat getuig dat sy hart onverdeelde by die Here is. Sy het nooit so saam met Jake gebid nie. Die gedagte skiet pynlik deur haar hart, maar dit vervaag terwyl Clay verder bid.

“U het vir elkeen van ons 'n plan. 'n Goeie plan. Help ons om ons oë oop te hou sodat ons dit nie mis nie. Dankie, Here. Amen.”

Haar hart mis 'n slag. *Help ons om ons oë oop te hou sodat ons dit nie mis nie?* Praat hy van haar, van hulle twee? Sy vra nie, en 'n paar minute later is sy in die kombuis besig om vir hulle iets te ete te kry.

Die atmosfeer bly heelaand gemaklik, ongekompliseerd. Hulle kyk countrymusiek-DVD's en speel backgammon, waarvan Clay vyf uit sewe wen. Jamie vertel hom dat Wanda haar die vorige aand gebel het. Joe het uiteindelik die geleentheid gehad om die kinders te ontmoet, en toe hy haar klein seuntjie sien, het hy begin huil.

“Hy lyk blykbaar net soos die seuntjie wat hulle verloor het.” Jamie byt haar lip vas. “Die kinders het boontoe gegaan en Joe was in trane. Wanda het nie geweet wat om met hom te doen nie. Hy het haar nie getroos toe hulle seuntjie dood is nie, en nou het sy nie geweet hoe om hom te troos nie.”

Clay frons. “Dit moet vir hulle al twee moeilik wees.”

“Maar hoor hier.” Jamie los die dobbelsteentjie waarmee sy gespeel het en kyk in sy oë. “Joe het om verskoning gevra. Hy het by haar gaan sit en deur sy trane vir haar gesê dat hy jammer is dat hy weggegaan het, dat hy nie daar was toe sy hom die nodigste gehad het nie.”

“Sjoe.” Clay vou sy arms. “God is besig om iets tussen hulle te doen.”

“Beslis.” Sy kyk na die bordspel. “Maar dinge was nog ongemaklik toe hy daar weg is. Wanda het my gevra om te bid dat daar iets gebeur, iets wat hulle sal help om die seer van die verlede te begrawe sodat hulle met nuwe oë na mekaar kan kyk.”

Daarna praat hulle weer oor die kaper wat Clay moes skiet, en 'n paar ander gevalle – bendegevegte en huislike geweld en dwelmklopjagte – situasies waarin sy opleiding handig te pas gekom het.

Dis die eerste keer dat Jamie aan die gevaarelement van sy werk dink. Dis net



so gevaarlik soos Jake s'n – in sommige opsigte selfs meer.

Haar reaksie is bewys daarvan dat sy verander het; sy vrees nie vir sy lewe nie. Of hulle nou gaan vriende bly en of daar iets meer gaan wees, sy gaan nooit weer in vrees lewe vir die veiligheid van iemand vir wie sy omgee nie. Buitendien, nes Jake, is Clay ook lief vir die Here. En dit is genoeg. Wanneer hy soggens werk toe gaan, trek hy twee wapenrustings aan. Sy koeëlvaste baadjie en die wapenrusting van God.

Haar vrees kan niks daarby voeg nie.

Hy maak die bord toe en leun met sy skouer teen die rugleuning. “Vertel my van jouself, Jamie. Buiten St. Paul's en hoedepartytjies, wat maak jy? Stokperdjies? Sport? Narreopleiding?”

Sy giggel. “Narreopleiding is my eintlike sterk punt.” Haar glimlag raak peinsend. Die vraag is moeiliker as wat dit klink. Wat maak sy nou eintlik met haar tyd? “Ek geniet dit om waterponie te ry.” In haar gedagtes sien sy haarself en Jake oor die water vlieg. Sy verban dit. “En in 'n stadium het ek keramiekklassie geneem. Jy weet, potte gebak en beeldjies gevef, sulke goed.”

“Nie meer nie?” Clay hou sy kop skeef, sy uitdrukking nuuskierig.

“Nee.” Sy haal haar skouers op. “Ek het net nie weer daarby uitgekom nie.”

“En die waterponie?”

Sy kyk na haar hande. Hy is nie opdringerig met sy vrae nie. Hy wil haar bloot beter leer ken, uitvind hoe ver sy sedert Jake se dood gekom het. Sy kyk weer na hom. “Nie so baie soos vroeër nie.”

Begrip verskyn in sy oë. “Was dit iets wat jy en Jake saam gedoen het?”

“Ja.”

Hy grys effens. “Jammer ... ek was nie ... ek't nie bedoel om iets op te haal wat ... ”

“Iets oor Jake nie?” Sy kry net nog meer respek vir die man voor haar. Buiten al sy ander kwaliteite, het hy deernis met ander.

“Ja ... ” Hy blaas sy asem uit. “Jammer.”

“Moenie wees nie.” Sy aarsel. “Vir die res van my lewe sal Jake se naam altyd opduik. Dit moet; ek het twintig jaar met hom gedeel.” Haar stem versag. Sy wys iets van haarself vir Clay wat bitter min ander mense sien. “Ná 11 September kon ek nie oor hom praat sonder om in tranes uit te bars nie.” Sy trek haar voete onder haar in. “Wat met Jake gebeur het, sal altyd hartseer wees, maar ek kan nou oor hom praat.” Haar mondhoëke lig. “Dis iets wat saam met die tyd kom.”

“Jy was baie lief vir hom, nè?” Hy sit die speletjie neer en skuif 'n bietjie nader.

“Ja.” Haar oë dwaal na die stoel aan die oorkant van die vertrek waar Jake altyd gesit het. “Ek sal hom nooit vergeet nie.” Een van Shania Twain se liedjies begin speel, 'n liefdeslied wat 'n intimiteit aan die oomblik verleen. Sy kyk weer na hom. “En jy, Clay? Hoeveel harte het jy al gebreek?”

“Nie veel nie.” Hy gee 'n laggie en sit agteroor teen die bank. Daar is net 'n

paar sentimeter tussen hulle. “Die meisies in los Angeles het nie harte nie; hulle is net slim en mooi.”

“Baie New Yorkers is maar net so.”

“Ek glo jou.” Sy lag is ontspanne. “Eintlik was daar ’n meisie, iemand wat ek op skool ontmoet het.”

Sy kyk ondersoekend na hom en sien dat sy oë nie verander wanneer hy oor die meisie praat nie. Wie sy ook al was, Jamie dink nie sy het nog ’n houvas op Clay Miles nie. “Het julle uitgegaan?”

“Nee. Ons was vriende. Om die waarheid te sê,” sy laggie laat haar glimlag, “sy het met my broer getrou.”

Jamie lig haar wenkbroue. “Regtig?”

“Jip.” Hy klink ontspanne, asof hy nie meer deur die seer daarvan geraak word nie.

“Het dit spanning tussen jou en jou broer veroorsaak?”

“Nee.” Clay kyk reguit na die muur. “My broer is ’n oulike ou. Hulle is gelukkig; sy hoort by hom. Buitendien ...”

Sy wag, maar toe hy nie verder praat nie, moet sy weet. “Buitendien wat?”

Hy draai na haar toe en kyk soekend in haar oë. “Sy het my nooit só laat voel nie.”

Daar is dit.

Die erkenenis wat die een of ander tyd moes kom. Die spesiale iets wat vanaf die eerste oomblik tussen hulle was, is nou in woorde uitgedruk. Haar polsslag versnel. Wat is sy veronderstel om te doen? Hoe moet sy reageer terwyl sy stokblind in die weë van ’n nuwe liefde is?

Sy kyk af; haar hande bewe. “Ek ... ek’t dit al op die veerboot gevoel.” Haar oë ontmoet syne. “Ek het gedink dis net ek.”

“Dis nie net jy nie.” Hy neem haar hand en vleg sy vingers deur hare. “Dis absurd; ek ken jou nog nie eens ’n week nie.” Sy het begrip vir die verbystering in sy stem, voel dit self. “Maar ek voel iets by jou wat ek nog nooit gevoel het nie.”

Dit raak stil tussen hulle. Tim McGraw sing iets wat rustig en mooi is, en Jamie het nie ’n behoefte aan praat nie. Wat sal hulle sê? Ongeag hulle gevoelens, sal hy oor twee weke Kalifornië toe moet gaan.

Hy praat eerste. “Ek lê snags wakker in my hotelbed en vra my af waarmee ek besig is; wat gaan ná drie weke hiervan kan kom?” Hy glimlag skeef. “Ek skat dis waarom ek nou daaroor praat.”

“Mmmm.” Sy gee die rugkant van sy hand ’n sagte drukkie. Haar hart klop steeds onstuimig, maar nie meer teen ’n wegholpas nie. Sy is senuweeagtig en onseker oor waarheen die gesprek op pad is en of sy haar hart moet oopmaak. Moet sy hom van haar ware gedagtes vertel – dat sy skuldgevoelens teenoor Jake het, dat Jake sou wou hê sy moet met haar lewe voortgaan? “Ek het self al baie gewonder.”

Clay los haar hand en sit sy arm om haar skouer sodat sy haar kop teen sy skouer kan laat sak. “Wanneer ek hieroor bid, voel ek die Here se hand hierin

... ” Hy wys na haar en dan na homself. “Wat ook al tussen ons is.” Hy hou sy asem vir ’n oomblik op. “Ek skat dit sal die beste wees om te wag dat Hy die ander vrae beantwoord.”

“Ek stem saam.” Sy stelling is die ideale samevatting van die aand, ’n manier om die aand af te sluit en te keer dat sy die situasie oor-analiseer. Sy glimlag vir hom, geborge in die gevoel van haar kop op sy skouer. “Dankie vir ’n heerlike aand.”

“Nou ja ... ” Hy lig sy wenkbroue gemaak sarkasties. “Ons het nie by die hoede uitgekom nie, maar wat ... ” Sy oë dans. “Dit was nie ’n te sleg aand nie.”

Nadat hy opgestaan het, trek hy haar op en loop saam met haar voordeur toe. Sy drukkie duur nie lank nie en suggereer niks meer as die spesiale gevoel wat hy reeds teenoor haar erken het nie. Toe hy uit is, kyk sy deur die venster hoe hy wegtrek. Sy ontleed haar gevoelens versigtig, maar daar is nie sprake van skuld of skaamte nie.

Iets in haar binneste is besig om te verander.

Dit was goed om oor hulle gevoelens te praat. Nie hy of sy is bereid om oorhaastig in iets betrokke te raak of ’n verhouding aan te knoop bloot omdat daar gevoelens tussen hulle is nie. Vir eers gaan hulle net die volgende twee weke geniet en glo dat God ’n plan vir hulle het. Hetsy die plan behels dat hulle saam is.

Of dat elkeen sy eie koers moet gaan.

# Chapter NINETEEN

The next week passed in a blur, in which Jamie Bryan was Clay's single focus.

They met at St. Paul's every day Jamie worked and walked through Battery Park, stopping for a few silent moments at the giant globe that was once the courtyard between the Twin Towers. It had been damaged in the terrorist attacks but not destroyed, and now it was on display to commemorate the city's fighting spirit, its will to survive. They took a tour boat to Liberty Island and held hands as they walked along the base of the Statue of Liberty.

There were lunch dates, and dinners with Sierra, and once Clay wore the jester hat when they went bowling.

Now it was Sunday night, and Clay wanted to stop time.

He and Jamie had spent the day in Central Park with Sierra. The temperatures were in the thirties, so they bundled up in coats and hats and scarves, and Sierra convinced them to consider coming back later in the week for an hour of ice skating.

The city was taking on the look of Christmas. Lights were strung across much of the park's perimeter and preparations were being made for the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade, coming up a week from Thursday. Clay's flight was set for Saturday; five days later he'd be sitting around the Thanksgiving table with Laura and Eric and Josh, wondering if his time in New York was all some sort of marvelous dream.

Wondering how soon he could find his way back.

Time had flown by. In six days his training would be over, and he and Joe would be on a plane back to Los Angeles, ready to start his department training for his new position as detective. He should be excited, focused on the future, the fascinating cases he'd be working on and getting involved in his local church—as he'd planned before he left for New York.

Funny, the last thing he'd told himself was that he'd meet a girl at

church. Who knew it would be a church in the heart of New York City?

He stretched out on his hotel bed and stared at a blank spot on the wall. It was just after nine o'clock; Sierra and Jamie had homework to focus on, so he'd made an early night of it. But the day had been amazing, full of the sweet glances and joined hands that had come to mark their time together.

He wanted to get back in his car and drive to Jamie's house so they wouldn't miss a minute of the time they had left. But this was good, this time apart. Even for a single evening. He needed time to think of a plan, a way to connect her world with his. The holidays were coming up, so maybe that was the answer.

Pictures played in his mind: Jamie and Sierra sitting around the table with Eric and Laura and Josh. Jamie would love all of them, but then what? Would she consider relocating if things between them continued? She had nothing concrete holding her in Staten Island—nothing except a lifetime of memories and her work at St. Paul's.

There was the possibility he could find a job in Manhattan with the NYPD, but that wasn't what he wanted. The weather was already near freezing, when back home it was still in the midseventies. Then there was the obvious—it would be close to impossible to start a life with Jamie in the place where she and her husband had shared a million memories, the place where he worked and died.

He exhaled and glanced at the nightstand. His cell phone was finished charging. Maybe he could call Eric and ask for advice, suggest the Thanksgiving idea and see what he thought. He picked up the phone, dialed the number, and waited.

Eric answered on the second ring, his voice upbeat. "Hey, it's my little brother! We thought you fell off the face of the earth."

"Sort of." Clay laughed. "I haven't had a free minute."

"They have you working twenty-fours, huh? I thought for sure they'd give you a few hours off here and there to call home." Eric was enjoying

the moment. “Laura and I were trying to guess what had happened to you, so I told her you probably met someone, fell in love, and decided to get a police job in New York.”

“Well...” Clay formed a stack of pillows behind his back and leaned into them. “I’m not getting a job in New York.”

Eric was silent for a moment. Then he uttered a single chuckle. “You telling me the other part’s true?”

“I don’t know.” He tried to picture his brother, face expectant, certain Clay was messing with him. “I think so.”

“*Really?*” This time Eric sounded excited. “You met someone? Hey, that’s great! Where’d you meet her?”

“It was the strangest thing.” Clay laughed again and told Eric the story. “They had a gun in her ribs by the time we pulled our weapons on them.”

“Serious? That’s amazing!” Eric paused. “So basically, you saved her life?”

“Pretty much.” He smiled. The room was cold, but he didn’t mind. Any time he thought about Jamie he felt warm inside. “I’ve seen her every day since.”

“Every day?” Concern tinged Eric’s tone. “What happens when you come back home?”

“We haven’t talked about it really. Jamie’s told me she has feelings for me, and I’ve told her the same thing. But that’s as far as we’ve gone.” He let his head fall back against the headboard. “I’m thinking about inviting her for Thanksgiving dinner. She and her daughter could fly out and join us at your house.” He paused. “What do you think?”

The line was silent.

“Eric?” Clay checked his cell phone; he hadn’t lost the call. “Hey, Eric, you there?”

“I’m here.” His voice held none of his previous excitement. “Her name’s Jamie?”

“Yeah.” Clay forced a chuckle. What did his brother care about her name? “Anyway, I’ve spent a lot of time with her and her daughter. Even their cat. I’d love to invite them for Thanksgiving.”

“Definitely.” Eric’s answer was quicker than before but his tone was still distracted. “Invite her; if she’s got your attention we’d love to meet her.”

The conversation stalled after that. Clay promised to call again toward the end of the week—to let them know if Jamie and her daughter would be coming. Then he hung up and stared at the phone. What was Eric’s deal? Was he hesitant about Jamie because Clay had only known her for a few weeks? Or because something at home had his attention?

It didn’t matter.

What did matter was how he was going to convince Jamie to fly to LA for Thanksgiving. The plan was crazy because who did that? Who invited a woman across the country for dinner when they’d only known each other a few weeks? But it wasn’t impossible. People found love at first sight all the time, didn’t they? Besides, they weren’t fresh out of college. They were adults; they knew enough about love to recognize it when it hit them square in the face.

Not that what they shared was love. Not yet. They still hadn’t kissed, hadn’t allowed their conversations to get deeper than that one night over backgammon. But they held hands, and he could read her eyes well enough to know she cared.

Would she come for Thanksgiving? Clay didn’t know, but he was sure of one thing. If she and Sierra came for Thanksgiving, they would hit it off great with Eric and Laura and Josh. His brother was bound to make Jamie feel comfortable, a part of the family.

Clay would have to be patient. He would simply tell Jamie she was invited and let her make the decision about whether to come. He set the phone back down on the nightstand. She would come; he was sure of it.

He could hardly wait to tell Jamie about the idea.

Eric set the receiver on the base and stared at the phone. Jamie and her daughter? From Staten Island? Adrenaline had shot through his veins at the mention of the name, and now—now he wasn't sure what to do next.

“Who was on the phone?” Laura padded into the bedroom. She wore jeans and thick fuzzy slippers. She had a small pink gift bag in her hands.

“Clay.” He couldn't change his distant tone. Eric caught his wife's attention. “He met someone.”

“Is that so?” Laura's eyebrows lifted and she gave him a sly smile. “Good for him.” She watched him for a moment and her mouth relaxed. “What's wrong?”

“What's wrong?” He blinked and tried to focus on what she was saying.

“Yes, you look like someone died.” She took a few steps toward him. “Didn't you say Clay met someone?”

Eric stared at her, wondering if he should put his fears into words. Finally he did a quiet gulp. “Her name's Jamie.” He slowed his words down, so each one would have an impact. “She has a daughter and she lives on Staten Island.”

“So, she—” Laura stopped and the color drained from her cheeks. “What's her last name?”

“I didn't ask.”

“What about her daughter?”

“Didn't ask that either.”

She groaned and her shoulders slumped some. “Why not?”

“Because.” He shook his head. “I didn't want to know.”

“Eric...” Laura dropped to the edge of the bed. “Staten Island is a big place. Ten million people live in the New York City area. You don't think it's the same woman.”

He turned so he was facing her. “What if it is?”

“It isn't.”



“No, seriously, Laura. What if it’s her?”

“I’m telling you, it’s not.” She brought her voice back to an even level. “There must be a thousand women named Jamie living on Staten Island. Half of them probably have daughters.” Her eyes told him that she was flustered, but she smiled. “Forget about it. Clay would’ve told you if it was the same Jamie.”

Eric gripped his kneecaps and studied the wall for a moment. Then he found her eyes again. “Clay doesn’t know her name; I only talked about her with you.” He shrugged. “It was too weird, the whole thing was something most people wouldn’t believe in the first place.” His voice fell a notch. “God used my time with Jamie to save my life, Laura. I’m the man I am because of her husband. But that sort of thing doesn’t exactly come up over lunch. Even with my brother.”

Laura stood and came around in front of him. This time she kept the pink gift bag in front of her. “You’re worrying about nothing.” She stopped near his knees and smiled. “She lives on Staten Island, right?”

“Right.” Eric pictured her, working in the kitchen, making blueberry pancakes for Sierra, sitting across from him sharing coffee each morning.

“Did she work?”

“No.” Eric tried to focus on his wife, but the memories were strong. Jamie had plenty of money—an accident settlement she’d inherited when her parents died in a car accident when she was barely twenty years old. She’d shared that with him when he was recovering, one of many facts meant to trigger his memory. He shook his head. “She had money in the bank; she didn’t need to work.”

Laura’s smile faded. “She didn’t?”

“No. Her husband didn’t need to work either. Fighting fires in New York City was a family thing, something in his blood.”

“You never told me that.” She shifted her weight to one foot. Her voice was higher than before, threatened. “So Jamie had a lot of money.”

“Yes.” He hadn’t talked much about his actual time with Jamie as

much as he'd shared the ways of life and faith he'd learned from her husband's journal, from the pages of his Bible. What was he supposed to do if she'd made a connection with Clay? He smiled and tried to hide the pounding of his heart. "Where's this going?"

Laura hesitated. The doubts lifted and cleared from her expression. "What I'm saying is, if she didn't work, then why on earth would she head into the city on a weekday morning?"

Eric hadn't thought about that. He looked at the ground for a minute and stroked his chin. "You're right." He found his wife's eyes again. "She would never have had to work, not with the money she had put away and the insurance settlement she would've gotten from her husband's death." His heart rate slowed. This was good. Thinking things through helped. His shoulders relaxed and he drew a calming breath. "If she decided to get a job—you know—just for fun, she never would've worked in the city; she hated that her husband worked there."

"Okay." Laura's tone was pleasant again. She was still standing in front of him, and she moved closer. "See? There's nothing to worry about."

Eric looped his arms around her waist and smiled. "I guess I overreacted a little. Like you said, there are millions of people in and around the city."

"Exactly." She bent down and kissed the tip of his nose. "Enough talk about that, all right?" Her eyes danced as she straightened. She held the pink bag out to him. "I've got my own news."

News? Wrapped up in a small pink gift bag? Eric felt his heart flip-flop as he took the package. "News?" His voice was a hoarse whisper.

"Go ahead." Her eyes were suddenly damp. She sat down beside him and motioned to the bag. "Open it, Eric."

He gulped. Was it what he thought it was? They'd tried to have another child ever since he came back home, after the terrorist attacks. Laura's doctor wasn't sure why she hadn't gotten pregnant, but in the next few months they were planning to look into some options that might help

speed the process along. He met her eyes, looked deep into her heart, and he knew. Before he lifted the tissue and found the tiny pink pair of booties, he knew. “Are you...?”

She nodded. “Six weeks already.” Her eyes welled up and she massaged her throat, looking for the words. “I bought pink because I just know, Eric. I know she’s a girl.”

Eric memorized her face, her expression, the look in her eyes. It was all worth it—the horrible injuries he’d received on September 11, the time with Jamie, his three months of recovery and learning to be a man of God. All of it led to this. “Laura...” In a slow rush they came together, holding each other, and Eric couldn’t describe the feeling inside him. Warm and full and grateful beyond words. He whispered against her hair. “You think it’s a girl?”

“I do.” She let out a happy cry. “God is so good. He had a plan all along.”

Indeed.

Eric held his wife and thought about the little girl they’d lost, the one Laura miscarried before Josh’s birth. He’d known he had a daughter, even in the throes of amnesia. It was why he felt right fathering Jamie’s daughter, Sierra, for three months. And it was one of the hardest things about realizing his real identity. He had a loving wife, a wonderful son.

But no daughter.

He nuzzled Laura’s cheek, her ear. “I’ll be happy with a baby—boy or girl.”

“I know.” She pressed her face against his and sighed. “It’s just that God has already worked so many miracles in our lives.”

And in that moment, the way everything was going—even things for Clay—Eric could do nothing but take Laura’s face between his hands and kiss her, long and slow, with the kind of love he’d never felt for anyone but her. Because she was right. God *had* already worked so many miracles in their lives. Why wouldn’t He be pulling together one more? A baby girl? A

daughter? The thought was more than he could imagine.

Eric couldn't think of a better miracle.

## Negentien

Die volgende week gaan in 'n waas verby, en Jamie Bryan is die enkele fokuspunt van Clay se aandag.

Wanneer Jamie werk, kry hulle mekaar elke dag by St. Paul's en gaan stap deur Battery Park. Hulle vertoef 'n paar stil oomblikke by die reuse brons bal wat op 'n tyd tussen die torings gepryk het. Dis beskadig in die terroriste-aanvalle, maar nie vernietig nie, en nou dien dit as simbool van die stad se vegtersgees en wil om oorlewing. Hulle neem 'n boottoer na Liberty Island en loop hand aan hand om die Vryheidstandbeeld.

Hulle kry mekaar vir middagetes, en saans kuier hulle saam met Sierra, en op 'n keer dra Clay die hofnarhoed toe hulle gaan kegelbal speel.

Nou is dit Sondagaand en Clay wil die tyd laat stilstaan.

Hy en Jamie en Sierra het die dag in Central Park deurgebring. In die ysige koue het hulle hulleself in jasse en hoede en serpe toegewikkel, en Sierra het hulle oortuig om later die week terug te gaan om te gaan ysskaats.

Die stad is besig om vir Kersfees geklee te word. Stringe liggies omsoom die park en daar word vir die Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade voorberei wat 'n week van Donderdag af plaasvind. Clay vlieg Saterdag terug; vyf dae later sal hy saam met Laura en Eric en Josh Thanksgiving hou en wonder of sy tyd in New York net 'n ongelooflike droom was.

En hoe gou hy kan terugkom.

Die tyd het gevlieg. Oor ses dae gaan hy sy opleiding voltooi, en dan vlieg hy en Joe Los Angeles toe waar hy departementele opleiding vir sy nuwe pos as speurder sal ontvang. Hy is veronderstel om opgewonde te wees, uit te sien na die toekoms en die fassinerende gevalle waaraan hy sal werk. Hy behoort by die plaaslike gemeente in te skakel – soos hy voor sy besoek aan New York besluit het.

Snaaks, die laaste ding wat hy vir homself gesê het, was dat hy 'n meisie by die kerk sou ontmoet. Wie sou kon raai dat dit 'n kerk in die hartjie van New York sou wees?

Hy strek hom op sy hotelbed uit en staar nikssende na die muur. Dis net na nege; Jamie moes Sierra met huiswerk help; dus het hy dit 'n vroeë aand gemaak. Maar dit was 'n ongelooflike dag, met die terloopse kyke en aanrakings wat kenmerkend geword het van hulle tyd saam.

Hy wil eintlik weer in sy motor klim en na Jamie toe ry sodat hulle elke oomblik van hierdie beperkte tyd kan deel. Maar dis ook goed – hierdie tyd weg van mekaar. Selfs vir net 'n aand. Hy het tyd nodig om aan 'n plan te dink, 'n manier om hulle wêreld te versoen. Die naderende feestyd kan dalk

die antwoord wees.

In sy geestesoog kan hy Jamie en Sierra saam met Eric en Laura en Josh aan tafel sien. Jamie sal mal wees oor hulle. En dan? Sal sy dit oorweeg om te verhuis as hulle verhouding ernstiger raak? Daar is niks konkreets wat haar op Staten Island hou nie – niks buiten 'n leeftyd se herinneringe en haar werk by St. Paul's nie.

Daar is natuurlik 'n moontlikheid dat hy 'n pos by die NYPD in Manhattan kan kry, maar dis nie wat hy wil hê nie. Hier is die temperature alreeds naby vriespunt terwyl dit by die huis steeds in die twintig grade is. Dan die vanselfsprekende. Dit sal bykans onmoontlik wees om 'n lewe saam met Jamie te begin op die plek waar sy en haar man miljoene herinneringe geskep het, die plek waar hy gewerk het en dood is.

Hy laat sy asem uit en kyk na die bedkassie. Sy selfoonbattery het klaar gelaai. Dalk moet hy Eric bel en raad vra, hoor wat hy van die Thanksgiving-idee dink. Hy tel die foon op, skakel die nommer en wag.

Eric antwoord na die tweede lui, sy stem opgeruimd. “Hei, dis my kleinboet! Ons dog jy het van die aardbol af verdwyn.”

“Soort van.” Clay lag. “Daar is nie tyd vir stilsit nie.”

“Hou hulle julle vier-en-twintig uur besig? Ek was seker dat hulle julle hier en daar 'n tydjie sou af gee om huis toe te bel.” Eric geniet die oomblik. “Ek en Laura het probeer raai wat van jou geword het, toe sê ek vir haar jy het tien teen een iemand ontmoet, verlief geraak en besluit om by die NYPD aan te sluit.”

“Wel ...” Clay druk 'n stapel kussings agter sy rug in en lê terug. “Ek is nog nie van plan om by die NYPD aan te sluit nie.”

Eric is vir 'n oomblik stil. Toe gee hy 'n halwe laggie. “Wil jy vir my sê die res is waar?”

“Ek weet nie.” Hy probeer hom sy broer voorstel, die afwagting op sy gesig, onseker of Clay met hom gekseer. “Ek dink so.”

“Regtig?” Hierdie keer klink Eric opgewonde. “Het jy iemand ontmoet? Dis great! Waar het jy haar ontmoet?”

“Jy sal nie glo nie.” Clay lag weer en vertel vir Eric die storie. “Hulle het 'n pistool in haar ribbes gehad teen die tyd dat ons ingespring het.”

“Ernstig? Dis ongelooflik!” Eric bly stil. “Met ander woorde, jy het basies haar lewe gered?”

“'n Mens kan seker so sê.” Hy glimlag. Dis koud in die kamer, maar hy gee nie om nie. Wanneer hy aan Jamie dink, klop sy hart warm. “Daarna het ek haar elke dag gesien.”

“Elke dag?” Hy hoor iets soos besorgdheid in Eric se stem. “Wat gebeur wanneer jy terugkom?”

“Ons het nog nie regtig daaroor gepraat nie. Jamie het reeds vir my gesê dat sy iets vir my voel, en ek vir haar. Maar ons het nie verder gepraat nie.” Hy rus met sy kop teen die kopstuk. “Ek oorweeg dit om haar vir Thanksgiving te nooi. Sy en haar dogtertjie kan deurkom en saam met ons daar by julle eet.”

Hy bly stil. “Wat dink jy?”

Stilte.

“Eric?” Clay kyk na sy selfoon; hy het nie die oproep verloor nie. “Hei, Eric, is jy daar?”

“Ek’s hier.” Sy stem is nou ontdaan van enige opgewondenheid. “Haar naam is Jamie?”

“Ja.” Clay gee ’n geforseerde laggie. Watter belang sal Eric by haar naam hê? “In elk geval, ek het baie tyd saam met haar en haar dogtertjie deurgebring. Selfs met hulle kat. Dit sal vir my baie lekker wees om hulle vir Thanksgiving te nooi.”

“Definitief.” Eric antwoord vinniger as die vorige keer, maar hy klink afwesig. “Nooi haar; as jy van haar hou, sal ons haar baie graag wil ontmoet.” Daarna loop die gesprek dood. Clay belowe dat hy later die week weer sal bel – om hulle te laat weet of Jamie en haar dogtertjie sal kan kom. Dan lui hy af en kyk na sy foon. Wat is dit met Eric? Is hy onseker oor Jamie omdat Clay haar nog net ’n paar weke ken? Of is daar iets by die huis wat sy aandag afgetrek het?

Dit maak nie saak nie.

Al wat saak maak, is hoe hy Jamie gaan oortuig om vir Thanksgiving Los Angeles toe te kom. Dis eintlik lagwekkend, want wie doen so iets? Wie nooi ’n New Yorkse vrou Los Angeles toe vir ete as hulle mekaar nog net ’n paar weke lank ken? Maar dis nie onmoontlik nie. Daar is daaglikse mense wat met die eerste oogopslag verlief raak. Buitendien, hulle is nie pas klaar met skool nie. Hulle is grootmense; hulle weet genoeg van die liefde om te weet wanneer hulle daarmee te doen kry.

Nie dat dit wat tussen hulle is, liefde is nie. Nog nie. Hulle het nog nie gesoen nie, het nie dieper gepraat as daardie een aand ná *The Lion King* nie. Maar hulle hou hande vas en hy lees haar oë goed genoeg om te weet dat sy omgee. Sal sy instem om vir Thanksgiving te kom? Clay weet nie, maar van een ding is hy seker. As sy en Sierra vir Thanksgiving kom, sal hulle wonderlik met Eric en Laura en Josh oor die weg kom. Sy broer sal Jamie laat tuis voel, soos deel van die familie.

Clay sal geduldig moet wees. Hy sal eenvoudig vir Jamie sê dat sy genooi is en die besluit aan haar oorlaat. Hy sit die telefoon weer op die bedkassie neer. Sy sal kom; hy is seker daarvan.

Hy kan amper nie wag om haar te vertel nie.

Eric sit die gehoorstuk neer en staar na die telefoon. Jamie en haar dogtertjie? Van Staten Island? Toe Clay haar naam noem, het die adrenalien deur sy are gestroom, en nou – nou is hy nie seker wat om volgende te doen nie.

“Wie het gebel?” Laura kom by hulle slaapkamer in. Sy dra haar jeans en dik, snoesige pantoffels. Daar is ’n klein pienk geskenksakkie in haar hand.

“Clay.” Die afwesige klank in sy stem laat sy vrou met verskerpte aandag na hom kyk. “Hy het iemand ontmoet.”

“Is dit so?” Laura se wenkbroue lig en sy gee hom ’n skelm glimlaggie. “Ek’s

bly vir hom.” Sy kyk ’n oomblik na hom en haar gesig raak ernstig. “Wat’s fout?”

“Wat’s fout?” Hy knip sy oë en probeer fokus op wat sy gesê het.

“Ja, dit lyk of jy doodstyding gekry het.” Sy loop na hom toe. “Het jy nie gesê Clay het iemand ontmoet nie?”

Eric kyk na haar en wonder of hy sy vrees in woorde moet omskakel. Hy sluk.

“Haar naam is Jamie.” Hy praat stadig sodat elke woord ’n impak sal hê. “Sy het ’n dogtertjie en sy bly op Staten Island.”

“So, sy ... ” Laura bly stil en die kleur verdwyn uit haar wange. “Wat is haar van?”

“Ek het nie gevra nie.”

“Wat van die dogtertjie?”

“Ek het dit ook nie gevra nie.”

Sy kreun en haar skouers hang. “Hoekom nie?”

“Want.” Hy skud sy kop. “Ek wou nie weet nie.”

“Eric ... ” Laura sak op die kant van die bed neer. “Staten Island is groot. Daar is tienmiljoen mense wat in en om New York bly. Jy dink nie dis dieselfde vrou nie, of hoe?”

Hy draai na haar. “Sê nou dis sy?”

“Dit sal nie wees nie.”

“Nee, ernstig, Laura. Sê nou dis sy?”

“Ek sê vir jou, dis nie.” Sy vervolg in ’n egaliger stem. “Daar is seker duisend Jamies wat op Staten Island bly. En die helfte van hulle het waarskynlik dogters.” Haar oë verklap haar verbouereerdheid, maar sy glimlag. “Vergeet daarvan. Clay sou vir jou gesê het as dit dieselfde Jamie was.”

Eric sit sy hande op sy knieë neer en staar vir ’n oomblik na die muur. Dan kyk hy weer in haar oë. “Clay weet nie wat haar naam is nie; ek het net met jou oor haar gepraat.” Hy trek sy skouers op. “Die hele storie was so vergesog; die meeste mense sou dit in die eerste plek nie geglo het nie.” Sy stem val. “God het my tyd saam met Jamie gebruik om my lewe te red, Laura. En danksy haar man is ek vandag die man wat ek is. Maar dis nie die soort ding waaroor ek oor ’n koppie tee gesels nie. Nie eens met my broer nie.”

Laura staan op en loop tot by hom. Hierdie keer hou sy die geskenksakkie voor haar. “Jy bekommer jou verniet.” Sy kom staan voor sy knieë en glimlag.

“Sy bly op Staten Island, nê?”

“Ja.” In sy gedagtes sien Eric haar in die kombuis besig om plaatkoekies vir Sierra te maak, dan met ’n beker koffie oorkant hom aan tafel.

“Het sy gewerk?”

“Nee.” Eric probeer op sy vrou fokus, maar die herinneringe wil nie los nie. Jamie het oorgenoeg geld – sy het baie geërf nadat haar ouers in ’n motorongeluk dood is toe sy skaars twintig was. Sy het hom daarvan vertel terwyl hy herstel het, een van die baie feite wat veronderstel was om hom te help onthou. Hy skud sy kop. “Sy het genoeg geld in die bank; dit was nie vir haar nodig om te werk nie.”

Laura se glimlag vervaag. “Nie?”

“Nee. Haar man ook nie. Maar hy was ’n brandweerman omdat dit in sy bloed was, ’n familie-ding.”

“Jy het my nooit gesê nie.” Sy versit haar gewig. Haar stem is hoër as gewoonlik, onseker. “So Jamie het baie geld gehad?”

“Ja.” Hy het nie soveel oor sy tyd by Jamie gepraat as oor al die lewenswaarhede wat hy in haar man se dagboek en Bybel ontdek het nie. Wat is hy veronderstel om te doen as sy Clay se Jamie is? Hy glimlag en probeer wegsteek dat sy hart onstuimig klop. “Waarom al die vrae?”

Laura aarsel. Die twyfel vervaag en verdwyn uit haar oë. “Ek dink net, as sy nie gewerk het nie, hoekom sou sy op ’n weeksooggend ingegaan het stad toe?” Eric het nie daaraan gedink nie. Hy kyk vir ’n paar oomblikke na die vloer en vryf oor sy ken. “Jy’s reg.” Hy ontmoet weer sy vrou se oë. “Sy sou nooit hoef te werk nie, nie met die geld wat sy gespaar het en haar man se lewensversekering nie.” Sy hartklop bedaar. Dis goed. Hy voel beter noudat hulle alles deurdink het. Sy skouers ontspan en hy trek sy asem in. “As sy sou besluit om werk te kry – jy weet – net om haar besig te hou, sal sy in elk geval nooit in die stad gaan werk nie; sy het niks daarvan gehou dat haar man daar gewerk het nie.”

“Oukei.” Laura klink ook weer ontspanne. Sy staan nog steeds voor hom, en sy beweeg nader. “Sien? Jy hoef nie bekommerd te wees nie.”

Eric haak sy arms om haar middel en glimlag. “Ek het seker ’n bietjie oorreageer. Soos jy sê, daar bly miljoene mense in en om die stad.”

“Presies.” Sy buk en soen hom op die punt van sy neus. “Genoeg daarvan, oukei?” Haar oë dans toe sy regop kom. Sy hou die pienk sakkie na hom toe uit. “Ek het my eie nuus.”

Nuus? In ’n klein pienk geskenksakkie? Eric se hart klop vinniger toe hy die pakkie neem. “Nuus?” Sy stem is ’n skor fluistering.

“Maak oop.” Haar oë is skielik traanblink. Sy kom sit langs hom en wys na die sakkie. “Maak oop, Eric.”

Hy sluk. Is dit wat hy dink dit is? Sedert hy teruggekom het ná die terroriste-aanvalle probeer hulle om nog ’n kind te hê. Laura se dokter is nie seker waarom sy nie swanger raak nie, maar hulle beoog om binne die volgende paar maande na opsies te kyk wat die proses kan help versnel. Hy ontmoet haar oë en kyk tot diep in haar hart, en hy weet. Voordat hy die sneespapier uithaal en die piepklein babakousies sien, weet hy. “Is jy ... ?”

Sy knik. “Dis nou ses weke.” Haar oë raak vol trane en sy vryf oor haar keel, te oorstelp om te praat. “Ek het pienk gekoop, want dis asof ek weet, Eric. Ek weet dis ’n dogtertjie.”

Eric memoriseer haar gesig, haar uitdrukking, die kyk in haar oë. Dis alles die moeite werd – die verskriklike beserings wat hy op 11 September opgedoen het, die tyd saam met Jamie, die drie maande van sy herstel waarin hy geleer het om ’n man van God te wees. Alles het hierheen gelei. “Laura ...” Hy trek haar teen hom vas en hulle bly lank so sit. Eric het nie woorde vir wat hy voel



nie. Warm en vol en onuitspreeklik dankbaar. Hy fluister teen haar hare. “So jy dink dis ’n dogtertjie?”

“Ja.” Sy gee ’n laggie. “God is so goed. Hy het nog altyd ’n plan gehad.”

Inderdaad.

Terwyl Eric sy vrou vashou, dink hy aan die klein dogtertjie wat hulle verloor het, die miskraam wat Laura voor Josh se geboorte gehad het. Hy het geweet dat hy ’n dogtertjie gehad het, selfs toe hy tydens sy geheueverlies niks anders geweet het nie. Dis waarom dit reg gevoel het om vir drie maande Sierra, Jamie se dogtertjie, se pa te wees. En dit was een van die moeilikste dinge rondom die ontdekking van sy ware identiteit. Hy het ’n liefdevolle vrou, ’n wonderlike seun.

Maar nie ’n dogtertjie nie.

Hy praat by Laura se oor. “Ek sal doodtevrede met ’n dogtertjie of seuntjie wees.”

“Ek weet.” Sy druk haar gesig teen syne en sug. “Dis net dat God reeds soveel wonderwerke in ons lewe gedoen het.”

En op hierdie oomblik, met alles – selfs Clay se situasie – kan Eric niks anders doen as om Laura se gesig tussen sy hande te neem en haar lank en stadig te soen nie, met die soort liefde wat hy nog nooit vir iemand anders gevoel het nie. Want sy is reg. God het alreeds soveel wonderwerke in hulle lewe gedoen. Waarom sou Hy nie nog een doen en vir hulle ’n babadogtertjie gee nie? Die gedagte is amper oorweldigend.

Eric kan hom nie ’n beter wonderwerk voorstel nie.

## Chapter TWENTY

Jamie had a new favorite spot on the ferry from Staten Island. If it was sunny—and that Monday morning the sky was brilliant—she stood against the ferry’s back railing. It wasn’t a place she would’ve considered before—not on the trip to Manhattan. Because she couldn’t see the empty place in the skyline from there.

But now...Every hour the message from Jake’s Bible, the words he’d written in the margins, became more clear. *Choose life*. That meant she didn’t have to stare at the empty skyline every day. She could stand at the back of the ferry, protected from the wind by the indoor seating area. She could stare back at Staten Island, the place where she was trying to learn how to live again, and she could think about things relevant to her new life.

The one without Jake.

She lifted her chin and let the sun hit her face square on. Something in her heart told her to savor the ferry ride, because she might not be making the trip much longer. Not to St. Paul’s anyway.

*Father...* She breathed in the feel of God around her, the sensation of His Spirit inside her. The brisk air, the brilliant spray of shine from the early morning sun on the water. Being out here always made her feel closer to God. *I’m trying, Lord, trying to choose life. But what about Clay? Where does he fit into my—*

There was a tap on her shoulder. She turned around and gasped. “Clay!”

“Hi.” He looked deep into her eyes, straight to her heart. “Fancy meeting you here.”

Her breath caught in her throat. She’d wondered if he might be on her ferry since he had training that morning, but she hadn’t seen him during the boarding process. She turned back toward the water and he took the spot beside her. Without the headwinds, it was easy to hear each other. “I was just praying about you.”

“Hmmm.” He edged closer, his arm full against hers. “Sounds interesting.”

“It was.” She stared at the rough water behind the boat. Her tone was light, teasing even—not giving away the electricity coursing through her veins, the way her mouth was dry because of his nearness.

He leaned his head back, taking the sun on his face the way she had earlier. “Let me guess. Praying that I’d find a new hat? Or that just once I might make dinner for you?”

She giggled and angled sideways to see him. Something about the winter air and the crisp blue sky made it feel as if they were the only two people on the boat. Her silliness faded and she looked at him, searching his eyes. “Wanna know what I was praying?”

“Wanna tell me?” His tone was measured, asking her questions his words did not. Questions like whether she was ready to share the heart behind her faith, whether she was ready to give even a glimpse of what she’d been feeling those past two weeks.

“Yeah.” Her eyes stayed locked on his. For days Jamie had wanted this moment, a reason to go beyond the obvious—that she enjoyed his company. And now—even as she was praying for wisdom—God had provided it. “I do want to tell you, Clay.” She hesitated. “I was asking God where you fit into my life.”

He had no clever volley, no thoughtful comeback. Instead his eyes grew more narrow, his gaze deeper than before. “Tell me, Jamie.”

She lifted one shoulder. “I don’t know, except...” She glanced at the water, then back at him. “Except I don’t want you to leave in a week.”

“Me neither.” He turned so they were both leaning against the boat’s railing, facing each other. “I worry about you, Jamie. That maybe you’re not ready for this.” He angled his head. “Any of this. Have you thought about it?”

She did a small laugh, but it was lost on the sound of the ferry engines. “That’s like asking me if I’m breathing.” Her smile faded. “Yes, I

think about it.” She reached out and took hold of both his hands. The sensation took her breath away, his fingers intertwined with hers. “I read something in Jake’s Bible the other day; it’s helped.”

“What did it say?” He rubbed his thumbs along the sides of her hands.

The sudden thickness in her throat made it hard to talk. The conversation was more intimate than anything they’d shared. “It was in Deuteronomy, chapter thirty.”

“Ahhh.” Clay’s face was only inches from hers, their voices such that only the two of them could hear. “I set before you life and prosperity, death and destruction.”

She hesitated, allowing their eyes to carry on a conversation of their own. “Choose life.” Tears built up in her eyes. “Jake wrote me a note in the margins. ‘Jamie, if you ever get the chance, choose life.’”

He felt her pain. It was written in his eyes and across the canvas of his heart, a place she could see clearly in this moment. “You miss him.”

“I do.” She used her shoulder to wipe a single tear. This wasn’t a time for crying; she was happy, really. Happy because this—standing here with Clay this way, talking about Scripture—was what God wanted from her. For her. This was life; attention on the living. “I miss him, but he’s never coming back.” She sniffed. “If he were here, he’d tell me not to live my life in a memorial. He’d want me to start living again.”

“I’m sorry, Jamie.” His eyes shone, though she didn’t think it was from the cold. “I’m sorry.”

She wasn’t sure which of them moved first, but slowly, as if drawn by a force neither of them could control, they came together. Their lips met in a gentle, soft kiss, one that was still building even as she drew back.

His breath was warm against her cheeks, and as though it was destined from the first time they were together on this very boat, his hand left hers and took gentle hold of her jaw, his fingers spreading along the side of her face. “Jamie...is it okay?”

“What?” She breathed the word against his face, so close his skin was

touching hers. Her heart was doing somersaults; it was all she could do to remember to inhale.

“Is it okay if I kiss you? Really kiss you?”

The moment he breathed his question against her lips, she was his. She moved closer, giving him permission to do what she’d been imagining and fearing, desiring and dreading, every day since they met. They kissed, and it was something from a dream. Her tears came again because she was kissing someone other than Jake—something she’d never done in all her life. And because it didn’t feel wrong and shameful, but sad and wonderful, impossible and right. God had answered her prayers not with quiet holy whispers but with Clay Miles. With this man standing there kissing her, putting his arms around her and holding her close, the way she wanted him to hold her forever.

He pulled back, catching his breath. “Jamie...” He looked at her, his eyes full of questions. Was she okay? Was it all right? Was it what she wanted?

“I’m fine, Clay. I am.” She closed the distance between them and kissed him this time, full on his mouth, silencing his doubts the only way she knew. This time when they drew apart, she laughed. Not loud or hard, but with an abandon that expressed the joy welling within her. She found his eyes and searched his soul. “God brought you into my life for a reason.” Her heart grew suddenly heavy; she felt the corners of her mouth fall. “I just wish we had more time.”

He took her hands again. His eyes sparkled with something, maybe anticipation. “Funny you should ask.”

“Funny why?” She loved how she felt, warm and safe and appreciated. The captain made his announcement. They were a few minutes from shore.

“Because I’ve been praying about us too.”

“You have?”

He leaned in and kissed her, his lips tender against hers. “Yes, I have.

I even talked to my brother back in Los Angeles. Everyone's in agreement."

She giggled. "About what?"

"About you joining us for Thanksgiving."

"In LA?" In a split instant, the idea bridged the gap between despair that he was leaving so soon and hope that maybe—just maybe—they'd find a way to see each other again. "You want me to come to LA for Thanksgiving."

"No." Clay's face got serious, but his eyes still danced. A huge grin spread over his face. "Not just you, crazy. You and Sierra." His words came faster. "Thanksgiving's always at my brother's house. He said he and his wife would love to have the two of you. You could fly in a few days before, and I could take you to the beach. I don't know, maybe take Sierra to Disneyland, that kind of thing. Make a week out of it."

He sounded like a kid talking about spring break, but she was as caught in the wave of enthusiasm as he. She thought for a moment.

It was possible, wasn't it? She had Jake's father, but he'd understand if they didn't head upstate for the holiday this once. Besides, she and Sierra hadn't been on a vacation since Jake died. "You're serious? You really want us to come?"

"Of course." His eyebrows were raised halfway up his forehead. "It'll be great, Jamie. Say you'll come."

She laughed again. She'd laughed more those past two weeks than in the past three years combined. "I have to make my orange salad; it's Sierra's favorite."

"That's the nice thing about California in November." He frowned at the sky and shivered. "Oranges are in season."

Everything was happening so fast, but Jamie didn't mind. That was the strangest part of all. They walked off the ferry together and Clay admitted he didn't have to be at work until noon. The captain had changed the schedule at the last minute because of a big drug bust going on that

morning in Chinatown.

They held hands as they headed across Battery Park, toward the line of waiting cabs. Jamie kept her steps slow; she didn't want the morning with Clay to end any sooner than it had to. "Why are you coming in so early?"

He stopped, faced her, and took both her hands in his. "I came to find you." He kissed her, just long enough to make her breathless again. "I had to tell you about Thanksgiving."

"Clay..." Her heart sang inside her. How had God done this? Brought a man into her life who was everything she needed, everything she hadn't even known she was looking for. "You came in early just for that?"

"Yep." They started walking again, their hands linked. "And now you're stuck with me. I might as well do my waiting at St. Paul's." His voice was upbeat. "Besides, I never finished looking at the memorial tables. Remember? I started on the last wall."

"True." They reached the curb and she hailed a cab. "Maybe it'll be slow and we can find somewhere to talk." Anywhere in the chapel would be comfortable. Aaron Hisel was working a later shift so there wouldn't be any need to explain Clay's presence or why they were together.

Traffic was busier than usual, and by the time they walked through the doors, one of the other volunteers waved Jamie down. A small crowd of people stood around her. "Help!" she mouthed.

Jamie nodded, and gave Clay a helpless smile. "I'll be back."

"Okay. No big deal." He squeezed her hand before letting it go. "I'll look around."

For the flash of an instant Jamie realized that for the first time Clay would see a picture of Jake—because it was still set up next to Sierra's letter at the first table near the door. Not that he'd know he was looking at Jake. And whereas the idea had bothered her the first time Clay came with her to the chapel, now it was something she'd come to accept, that one day Clay would see Jake. A part of her wanted him to see the man she'd loved

since she was a girl. It would be one way of blending her worlds, life before Jake and life after him.

She joined the other volunteer and answered questions for ten minutes before Clay caught her attention. He was staring at the picture of Jake, staring at him with an odd intensity. Did he know? How could he? There was no way he could know that the man in the picture was her husband.

Then again...The letter next to the photo was signed *Sierra*. How many little girls named Sierra would've lost a firefighter father? She started to excuse herself, head back toward him, when he looked straight at her. Forty feet separated them, but even from that far away she could see his face.

It was ashen.

She slowed, suddenly afraid. Why did Clay look that way? Had he changed his mind about her, maybe decided she must not be ready for something new? His eyes were wide, his mouth open, looking like a person in shock.

"Jamie..."

Though she couldn't hear him, she could read her name on his lips.

Her heart skittered about, warning her that something—something she couldn't understand—had in a moment's time gone very wrong. She closed the distance between them, her eyes moving from Clay to the photo of Jake, and back again. "Clay?" She remembered to breathe. "What is it?"

"Is that...that's your husband, right?"

She let her eyes find Jake's. The clear blue eyes and short dark hair, the chiseled features of the man who loved her and promised her a lifetime. "You saw Sierra's note."

He nodded, his face still pale. For a long time he said nothing, just looked at Jake, realization coming into his expression.

Jamie relaxed. His reaction was understandable. Here was the picture of a man Jamie never would've left, of Sierra's father. And his likeness—in some cruel twist of senseless hatred—was not gracing the home where



Jamie and Sierra lived, but a table in St. Paul's Chapel.

Of course Clay looked shocked. This was probably the first time he'd felt the terrorist attacks personally. She just needed to talk to Clay the way she'd talked to so many other visitors at St. Paul's. She would grieve with him, and they would come away richer for the experience. She was about to take his hand, when he turned to her.

"Jamie." The fear in his eyes was worse than before. "He looks exactly like my brother."

"Like your—" His words hit her in slow motion, each one ramming into her heart and kicking her in small circles until she had to brace herself against the table to keep from falling to the floor. She could feel the blood leaving her face, feel her knees trembling. Her eyes were locked on his, searching for some sort of explanation. He was kidding, or maybe his brother had dark hair or blue eyes. Not an exact replica, certainly. Because God never would've brought this marvelous man into her life only to have it all end in some cruel joke.

Words gathered in her throat but she couldn't say them. She searched Clay's eyes, his face. Bits of conversations came rushing back and she sifted through them for a sign. He couldn't be Eric's brother; it wasn't possible. Sure, he was from California, but that didn't mean anything. His name was Clay Miles, not—

The impossible breathed its hot breath against the nape of her neck. She moved back a few steps, leaning against one of the white pillars. "What's..." Her words were scratchy. It took everything to complete the question. "What's your last name?"

He looked as devastated as she felt. He moved closer, leaving only a foot between them. "Clay Michaels."

*No!* No, it wasn't true. His name was Clay Miles, not Michaels. The spinning in her head got worse and nausea swept over her. "No." She looked away. Navigating with her hands, she made it around the pillar and dropped into the first pew. Then she leaned her forearms on the back of the

seat in front of her and hung her head.

She felt him move into the pew and ease into the space beside her. “Jamie, look at me. Talk to me.” Anguish was raw in his voice, mixed with shock.

It took everything to lift her head. This wasn’t happening; it couldn’t be. “You...you told me your name was Clay Miles.”

“No, Jamie.” Alarm joined the emotions burning in his eyes. He lowered his brow, concentrating. “I told you my name on the ferry. We were outside in the stairwell; it was loud.”

He was right. She could picture the moment, standing before him, the horn sounding when he told her his name. No wonder there’d been something familiar about him. He had his brother’s eyes.

Clay was still watching her, staring at her, caught in the middle of a nightmare that couldn’t possibly be true. “So you’re the one.” His words were slow, full of disbelief. “Of all the people in this city, how could you be the one?”

“I’m sorry, Clay. I can’t...” She didn’t finish her sentence; she didn’t need to. The look on Clay’s face told her he understood. That because of his relationship to Eric, she and Clay could never move forward.

She closed her eyes and lifted her face. *God...why? Of all people, why him?* If only she’d heard him right the first time, heard him say Clay Michaels. She would’ve known instantly why he looked familiar. They would’ve figured out their strange connection, talked about it for the rest of the ferry ride, and gone their separate ways.

“Jamie, nothing has to change.” Clay leaned closer, his eyes wide, imploring her. “You don’t have to come back for Thanksgiving if you don’t want to; your time with Eric has nothing to do with this.”

She shook her head. “I can’t.” She met his eyes and willed him to understand. Looking at Eric again would be like looking at Jake. She couldn’t carry on even a friendship with Clay if it meant spending time with Eric. It’d be like trying to ignore Jake’s ghost in the room.

Clay looked at his watch and pursed his lips. "I have to go." He put his hand on hers. "Jamie, please. We'll talk about this. Nothing's changed."

Jamie wanted to cry. She leaned toward him and slipped her arms around his neck. "Go, Clay." She couldn't tell him good-bye, couldn't bear it. A part of her was dying, the part that was connected to the man in her arms.

He stroked her back. She could feel his heart pounding against her shoulder. "I'll call you as soon as I'm done today."

The walls were up. His words no longer penetrated her heart the way they had before. She drew back and nodded. There was wetness on her cheeks, and for the first time she noticed. She was crying. He used his knuckle to wipe the tears from her cheeks. Then he stood and backed out of the pew, his eyes on her the entire time. "I'll call."

She didn't argue. She wanted to be alone, to gather her feelings and stop the dizziness in her head. To look in the mirror and convince herself that the impossible had happened. Eric Michaels's brother really had come to town, saved her life, and made her feel things she hadn't felt since Jake.

"Don't, Jamie, please." He stopped. "This doesn't have to mean anything. Nothing's changed." His eyes told her he was desperate for her to see things his way, that even though this was a twist, a strange coincidence, it didn't need to mean the end of what they'd started.

"Go." She held up her hand, her eyes locked on his until he walked through the doors.

When he was gone, she knew it was too late. What they'd found was gone. If they'd figured it out that first morning, they could've spared themselves all of this. Because while she might be ready to start living again, ready to face a future without Jake, she couldn't start a relationship with Eric's brother.

Not if it meant seeing Eric again.

After all they'd been through, Jamie knew the only way she'd ever move on was to let him go. Bid him good-bye and never look back, not for

anything.

Not even his brother, Clay.

## Twintig

Jamie het 'n nuwe gunstelingplek op die veerboot van Staten Island af. As dit sonnig is – en op hierdie Maandagoggend is die lug die mooiste blou – staan sy teen die veerboot se agterste reling. Sy sou voorheen nooit hier gestaan het nie – nie op pad Manhattan toe nie. Want sy kan nie die stadshorison van hier af sien nie.

Maar nou ... Die boodskap in Jake se Bybel, dit wat hy in die kantlyne geskryf het, word al hoe duideliker. *Kies die lewe*. Dit beteken dat sy nie elke dag na die stad se kaal silhoeët hoef te kyk nie. Sy kan agter op die veerboot staan, uit die wind. Sy kan terugkyk na Staten Island, die plek waar sy nou leer om weer te begin lewe, en sy kan aan dinge dink wat op haar nuwe lewe van toepassing is.

Die lewe sonder Jake.

Sy lig haar ken op sodat die son vol op haar gesig kan skyn. Iets in haar hart sê vir haar dat sy die veerbootrit moet geniet omdat sy dalk nie veel langer so sal ingaan stad toe nie. Nie na St. Paul's toe nie, in elk geval.

*Vader ...* Sy baai haar in die gevoel van die Here rondom haar, die sensasie van sy Gees in haar binneste. Die vars lug, die skittering van die vroeë oggendson op die water. Om hier te wees laat haar altyd nader aan die Here voel. *Ek probeer, Here, ek probeer die lewe kies. Maar wat van Clay? Waar pas hy in my ...*

Iemand tik haar op die skouer. Sy draai om en snak na asem. “Clay!”

“Haai.” Hy kyk diep in haar oë, tot in haar hart. “Wie sou kon dink ek gaan jou hier raakloop?”

Haar asem is vir 'n oomblik weg. Sy het geweet dat hy vanoggend moet ingaan vir opleiding, maar sy het hom nie op die veerboot gesien toe sy aan boord gekom het nie. Sy draai weer na die water en hy kom staan langs haar. Sonder die wind van voor is dit maklik om mekaar te hoor. “Ek het nou net oor jou staan en bid.”

“Hmm.” Hy skuif nader, sy arm teen hare. “Klink interessant.”

“Dit was.” Sy staar na die waterspoor agter die boot. Haar stem is lig, amper tereg. Sy wil nie hê hy moet agterkom hoe onstuimig haar hart klop en hoe droog haar mond is omdat hy naby is nie.

Hy laat sak sy kop agteroor om die son op sy gesig te voel. Soos sy vroeër gedoen het. “Laat ek raai. Óf jy het gebid dat ek 'n nuwe hoed moet kry. Óf dat ek net een keer vir jou sal kos maak.”

Sy giggel en leun skuins om na hom te kyk. Iets aan die winterlug en die byt in die blou hemel laat dit voel asof hulle die enigste twee mense op die boot

is. Sy skud haar lawwigheid af en kyk speurend in sy oë. “Wil jy weet wat ek gebid het?”

“Wil jy vir my sê?” Sy stem is gelykmatig, maar gevul met vrae wat hy nie in woorde uitspreek nie. Is sy gereed om haar hart met hom te deel? Is sy gereed om hom ’n kykie te gee op wat sy die afgelope twee weke gevoel het?

“Ja.” Haar oë los syne nie vir ’n oomblik nie. Dis al dae lank dat Jamie so ’n oomblik wou hê, ’n rede om verby die vanselfsprekende – die feit dat sy sy geselskap geniet – te praat. En nou, net toe sy besig was om vir wysheid te bid, het God die geleentheid voorsien. “Ek wil jou sê, Clay.” Sy aarsel. “Ek het die Here gevra waar jy in my lewe pas.”

Hierdie keer antwoord hy nie met ’n pittigheid nie. Sy oë vernou en sy kyk is dieper as voorheen. “Vertel my, Jamie.”

Sy haal haar een skouer op. “Ek weet nie, net ... ” Sy kyk vinnig na die water en weer na hom. “Net dat ek nie wil hê jy moet oor ’n week weggaan nie.”

“Ek ook nie.” Hy draai dwars sodat hulle teenoor mekaar teen die reling staan.

“Ek’s bekommerd oor jou, Jamie. Dat jy dalk nie vir so iets gereed is nie.” Hy hou sy kop skeef. “Vir ons. Het jy al daaroor gedink?”

Sy gee ’n klein laggie, maar dit word deur die geraas van die boot se enjins ingesluk. “Dis soos om my te vra of ek asemhaal.” Haar gesig raak ernstig.

“Ja, ek dink daaroor.” Sy neem albei sy hande in hare. Die sensasie van hulle ineengevlegte vingers slaan haar asem weg. “Ek het nou die dag iets in Jake se Bybel gelees; dit het gehelp.”

“Wat het daar gestaan?” Sy duime vryf oor die kante van haar hande.

Die skielike knop in haar keel maak dit moeilik om te praat. Die gesprek is meer intiem as enigiets wat hulle al gedeel het. “Dit het uit Deuteronomium 30 gekom.”

“Aa.” Clay se gesig is sentimeters van hare, hulle stemme intiem gedemp. “Ek het vandag die lewe en die voorspoed, die dood en die teenspoed aan jou voorgehou.”

Sy aarsel en laat toe dat hulle oë ’n gesprek van hulle eie voer. “Kies die lewe.” Trane wel in haar oë op. “Jake het iets in die kantlyn vir my geskryf. ‘Jamie, as jy die kans kry, kies die lewe.’”

Hy voel haar seer. Dis in sy oë en op die skilderdoek van sy hart geskryf – ’n plek wat sy nou baie duidelik kan sien. “Jy mis hom.”

“Mmmm.” Sy lig haar skouer om ’n traan van haar wang af te vee. Dis nie nou die tyd om te huil nie; sy is gelukkig, regtig. Gelukkig, want om hier by Clay te staan en oor die Bybel te gesels, is wat God van haar begeer. Vir haar. Dit is die lewe; om op die lewendes te fokus. “Ek mis hom, maar hy gaan nooit terugkom nie.” Sy snuif. “As hy hier was, sou hy gesê het dat ek nie my lewe in ’n monument moet slyt nie. Hy sou wou hê dat ek weer moes begin lewe.”

“Ek’s jammer, Jamie.” Sy oë skitter, maar dis nie van die koue nie. “Ek’s jammer.”

Sy weet nie wie van hulle eerste beweeg nie, maar stadig, asof gedring deur ’n

krag waaroor nie een van hulle beheer het nie, raak hulle monde aan mekaar. Hulle lippe ontmoet in 'n sagte, teer soen wat inniger raak voordat sy hom laat gaan.

Sy asem is warm teen haar gesig, en asof dit vanaf hulle eerste ontmoeting so bestem is, los hy haar hand en kelk haar gesig in sy hand, sy vingers oor haar wang gesprei. “Jamie ... is dit oukei?”

“Wat?” Sy adem die woord teen sy gesig, so naby dat sy vel aan hare raak. Haar hart slaan bollemakiesie; sy moet onthou om asem te haal.

“Is dit oukei as ek jou soen? Regtig soen?”

Die oomblik toe hy die woorde teen haar lippe fluister, is Jamie syne. Sy beweeg nader asof om hom toestemming te gee om te doen waarvan sy van die heel begin af gedroom het, waarna sy gehunker het en wat sy gevrees het. Hulle soen, en dis soos iets uit 'n droom. Haar trane loop weer, want sy soen iemand anders as Jake – vir die heel eerste keer in haar lewe. En omdat dit nie verkeerd of skandalig voel nie, maar hartseer en wonderlik, onmoontlik en reg. God het haar gebede nie met sagte, heilige fluisteringe beantwoord nie, maar met Clay Miles. Met die man wat haar in sy arms neem en soen en vashou soos sy wil hê hy haar vir altyd moet vashou.

Hy is halfuitasem toe hy haar laat gaan. “Jamie ... ” Hy kyk na haar, sy oë vol vrae. Is sy oukei? Dra dit haar goedkeuring weg? Is dit wat sy wil hê?

“Ek’s oukei, Clay. Regtig.” Hierdie keer is dit sy wat naderbeweeg om hom vol op die mond te soen en sy onsekerheid stil. Toe hulle mekaar laat gaan, lag sy. Nie hard of luidrugtig nie, maar met 'n ongedwongenheid waarin haar vreugde uiting vind. Sy kyk in sy oë. “God het jou met 'n rede in my lewe gebring.” Daar kom skielik 'n swarigheid oor haar hart; sy voel hoe haar gesig val. “Ek wens net ons het meer tyd gehad.”

Hy neem haar hande weer in syne. Dalk verbeel sy haar, maar iets soos afwagting glinster in sy oë. “Snaaks dat jy dit noem.”

“Hoe bedoel jy snaaks?” Sy koester die warmte, veiligheid en waardering wat sy ervaar. Die kaptein doen sy aankondiging. Hulle is 'n paar minute van die hawe af.

“Want ek het ook oor ons gebid.”

“Regtig?”

Hy leun oor en soen haar, sy lippe teer op hare. “Ja, ek het. Ek het selfs met my broer in Los Angeles gepraat. Almal stem saam.”

Sy giggel. “Waaroor?”

“Dat jy saam met ons moet kom Thanksgiving hou.”

“In Los Angeles?” In 'n breukdeel van 'n sekonde oorbrug die uitnodiging die afstand tussen die wanhoop dat hy so gou moet weggaan, en die hoop dat hulle dalk – net dalk – 'n plan sal kan maak om mekaar weer te sien. “Wil jy hê ek moet Los Angeles toe kom vir Thanksgiving?”

“Nee.” Clay se gesig is ernstig, maar sy oë lag in hare. Dan glimlag hy breed.

“Nie net jy nie, meisiekind. Jy en Sierra.” Nou tuimel die woorde oor sy lippe.

“Ons hou altyd Thanksgiving by my broer-hulle. Hy sê dit sal vir hom en sy

vrou heerlik wees om julle daar te hê. Julle kan 'n paar dae vroeër kom, en ek kan julle 'n bietjie rondwys. Ek weet nie, dalk kan ons Sierra Disneyland toe neem, so iets. 'n Week daarvan maak.”

Hy klink soos 'n kind wat oor 'n seevakansie praat, maar die golf van entoesiasme het haar ook in sy greep. Sy dink vir 'n oomblik. Dit kan werk. Sy het Jake se pa, maar hy sal verstaan as hulle hierdie een keer nie deurkom vir Thanksgiving nie. Buitendien, sedert Jake se dood was sy en Sierra nog nooit met vakansie nie. “Is jy ernstig? Wil jy regtig hê ons moet kom?”

“Natuurlik.” Hy praat met opgetrekte wenkbroue. “Dit sal wonderlik wees, Jamie. Sê jy sal kom.”

Sy lag weer. Sy het die laaste twee weke meer gelag as die afgelope drie jaar saam. “Ek sal my lemoenslaai moet maak; dis Sierra se gunsteling.”

“Dis die lekker ding van Kalifornië in November.” Hy kyk fronsend op in die lug en ril. “Dis lemoenseisoen.”

Alles gebeur so vinnig, maar Jamie gee nie om nie. Dis die vreemdste van alles. Hulle gaan saam aan wal en Clay noem dat hy eers twaalfuur by die werk moet wees. Die kaptein het die program op die laaste nippertjie verander nadat 'n groot dwelmklopjag in Chinatown gedoen is.

Hulle loop hand aan hand deur Battery Park na die ry wagtende taxi's. Jamie loop stadig; sy wil nie hê die oggend saam met Clay moet vroeër verby wees as wat nodig is nie. “Hoekom het jy so vroeg ingekom?”

Hy gaan staan, draai na haar en neem haar hande in syne. “Ek het vir jou gekom.” Hy soen haar, net lank genoeg om haar weer uitasem te laat. “Ek moes met jou oor Thanksgiving praat.”

“Clay ...” Haar hart is so vol. Hoe het die Here dit gedoen? 'n Man oor haar pad gestuur wat alles is wat sy nodig het, soveel meer as wat sy gedink het sy wou hê. “Het jy net daarvoor vroeg ingekom?”

“Jip.” Hy laat haar een hand gaan en hulle begin weer loop. “En nou is jy met my opgeskeep vir die res van die oggend. Ek kan netsowel by St. Paul's uithang.” Sy stem is opgeruimd. “Ek het in elk geval nog nie na die hele uitstalling gekyk nie, onthou? Ek het mos by die laaste muur begin.”

“Ek onthou.” Hulle bereik die sypaadjie en sy roep 'n taxi. “As dit 'n stil oggend is, kan ons iewers sit en gesels.” Enige plek in die kapel sal werk. Aaron Hisel werk eers vanmiddag; dus sal sy nie nodig hê om Clay se teenwoordigheid te verduidelik of te sê hoekom hulle saam is nie.

Die verkeer is besiger as gewoonlik, en teen die tyd dat hulle by die kapel kom, word Jamie deur een van die ander vrywilligers nadergewink. 'n Hele groep mense staan rondom haar. “Help!” vorm sy die woord met haar mond.

Jamie knik en glimlag hulpeloos vir Clay. “Ek's nou-nou weer terug.”

“Oukei. Neem jou tyd.” Hy gee haar hand 'n drukkie voordat hy dit laat gaan. “Ek gaan 'n bietjie rondkyk.”

Skielik besef Jamie dat Clay vir die eerste keer 'n foto van Jake gaan sien – by Sierra se briefie op die eerste tafel naby die deur. Nie dat hy sal weet dis 'n foto van Jake nie. Maar waar dit haar die eerste keer gepla het toe Clay saam

met haar by die kapel was, het sy intussen daarmee vrede gemaak dat Clay eendag 'n foto van Jake sal sien. 'n Deel van haar wil hê dat hy die man moet sien wat sy van skool af liefgehad het. Dit sal 'n manier wees om haar wêreld te versoen, die lewe voor Jake en die lewe daarna.

Sy sluit by die ander vrywilliger aan en is tien minute lank besig om vrae te beantwoord toe Clay haar oog vang. Hy staan na Jake se foto, en daar is 'n vreemde intensiteit in sy oë. Weet hy? Hoe is dit moontlik? Hy kan onmoontlik weet dat die man op die foto haar man is.

Aan die ander kant ... Die briefie langs die foto is geteken *Sierra*. Hoeveel dogtertjies met die naam Sierra sou 'n brandweerman-pa verloor? Sy begin haarself verskoon en is na hom toe op pad toe hy reguit na haar kyk. Hulle is seker tien meter van mekaar af, maar selfs op hierdie afstand kan sy Clay se gesig sien.

Hy is asvaal.

Sy loop stadiger, skielik bang. Hoekom lyk Clay so? Het hy van plan verander, dalk besluit dat sy nog nie vir iemand anders gereed is nie? Sy oë is groot, sy mond oop, soos iemand wat in skok verkeer.

“Jamie ...”

Al kan sy hom nie hoor nie, lees sy haar naam op sy lippe.

Haar hart begin wild kop asof om haar te waarsku dat iets – iets wat sy nie verstaan nie – binne 'n paar sekondes verskriklik verkeerd geloop het. Sy loop tot by hom en haar oë beweeg van Clay na die foto van Jake en weer terug. “Clay?” Sy onthou om asem te haal. “Wat is dit?”

“Is dit ... dis jou man, nè?”

Haar oë beweeg na Jake se gesig. Die helderblou oë en kort, donker hare, die sterk gelaatstrekke van die man wat haar liefgehad het en haar 'n leeftyd bymekaar belowe het. “Jy het Sierra se briefie gesien.”

Hy knik, sy gesig steeds bleek. Vir 'n lang oomblik sê hy niks nie; hy kyk net na Jake terwyl 'n besef in sy oë gestalte kry.

Jamie ontspaan. Sy verstaan sy reaksie. Voor hom is 'n foto van die man aan wie Jamie haar lewe beloof het, Sierra se pa. En sy foto hang nie in die huis waar Jamie en Sierra bly nie, maar staan op 'n tafel in St. Paul's – die wrede gevolg van 'n sinnelose haat.

Natuurlik lyk Clay geskok. Dis waarskynlik die eerste keer dat hy die terroriste-aanvalle op 'n persoonlike vlak ervaar. Sy het eenvoudig nodig om met Clay te praat soos met so baie ander besoekers aan St. Paul's. Sy sal saam met hom treur, en uiteindelik sal hulle as ryker mense hier weggaan. Sy is op die punt om sy hand te neem toe hy na haar toe draai.

“Jamie.” Die vrees in sy oë is groter as tevore. “Hy lyk presies soos my broer.”

“Soos jou ...” Sy woorde tref haar in stadige aksie. Dit stuur skokgolwe deur haar hart en land soos vuishoue sodat sy aan die tafel moet vashou om te keer dat sy val. Sy voel hoe die bloed uit haar gesig verdwyn, voel haar knieë bewe. Haar oë soek na die een of ander verduideliking in syne. Hy maak 'n



grap, of dalk het sy broer donker hare en blou oë. Definitief nie 'n presiese replika nie. Want God sou hierdie ongelooflike man nooit na haar toe gebring het net om 'n wrede grap daarvan te maak nie.

Daar is 'n klomp woorde in haar keel, maar sy kan hulle nie uitkry nie. Sy kyk soekend in Clay se oë, sy gesig. Brokkies van gesprekke kom na haar toe terug en sy sif deur hulle op soek na 'n teken. Hy kan nie Eric se broer wees nie; dis nie moontlik nie. Ja, hy kom van Kalifornië, maar dit beteken niks nie. Sy naam is Clay Miles, nie ...

Die onmoontlike blaas met 'n warm asem in haar nek. Sy gee 'n paar tree terug totdat sy teen een van die wit pilare staan. "Wat's ... " Haar stem is krapperig. Dit kos al haar inspanning om die vraag te voltooi. "Wat's jou van?"

Hy lyk net so verpletter soos sy voel. Hy kom nader, tot byna teen haar. "Clay Michaels."

*Nee!* Nee, dis nie waar nie. Sy naam is Clay Miles, nie Michaels nie. Die dronk gevoel in haar kop raak erger en sy voel naar. "Nee." Sy kyk weg en loop op bewerige bene tot by die naaste bank waar sy neersak. Daar leun sy met haar voorarms op die rugleuning voor haar en laat hang haar kop.

Sy voel hoe hy langs haar kom sit. "Jamie, kyk na my. Praat met my." Sy stem is rou van emosie, van skok.

Sy tel haar kop moeisam op. Hoe kan dit wees? Dis nie waar nie. "Jy ... jy't vir my gesê jou naam is Clay Miles."

"Nee, Jamie." Saam met die ander emosies wat in sy oë brand, is daar nou ook skok. Hy konsentreer met saamgetrekte wenkbroue. "Ek het op die veerboot vir jou gesê wat my naam is. Ons was buite op die trap; dit het geraas."

Hy is reg. Sy sien weer die oomblik, onthou hoe sy voor hom gestaan het en dat die mishoring geblaas het toe hy sy naam gesê het. Ook geen wonder dat daar van die begin af iets bekends aan hom was nie. Hy het sy broer se oë.

Clay staan steeds met starende oë na haar en kyk, vasgevang in die middel van 'n nagmerrie waaruit hulle nie kan wakker word nie. "Dan is dit jy." Sy woorde is stadig, vol ongeloof. "Uit al die mense in hierdie stad, hoe kan dit jy wees?"

"Ek's jammer, Clay. Ek kan nie ... " Sy laat haar woorde in die lug hang; sy hoef niks meer te sê nie. Clay se oë wys vir haar dat hy verstaan. Dat haar verhouding met Eric 'n toekoms vir haar en Clay onmoontlik maak.

Sy maak haar oë toe en kyk op. *Here ... waarom? Uit al die mense ... waarom hy?* As sy hom maar net die eerste keer reg gehoor het. Dat sy naam Clay Michaels is. Sy sou dadelik geweet het waarom hy bekend lyk. Hulle sou oor die vreemde toeval gesels het en aan die einde van die veerbootrit elkeen sy eie koers ingeslaan het.

"Jamie, niks hoef te verander nie." Clay leun nader, sy oë groot en smekend. "Jy hoef nie vir Thanksgiving te kom kuier as jy nie wil nie; jou tyd met Eric het niks met ons situasie te doen nie."

Sy skud haar kop. "Ek kan nie." Sy kyk in sy oë en pleit dat hy moet verstaan.

Om weer na Eric te kyk, sal wees soos om vir Jake te sien. Sy kan nie eens met Clay vriende wees as dit beteken dat Eric weer in haar lewe gaan wees nie. Dit sal wees soos om Jake se spook in die vertrek te probeer ignoreer.

Clay kyk op sy horlosie en pers sy lippe saam. “Ek moet loop.” Hy plaas sy hand op hare. “Jamie, asseblief. Kom ons praat hieroor. Niks het verander nie.”

Jamie wil huil. Sy leun nader en haar arms gaan om sy nek. “Jy moet gaan, Clay.” Sy kan nie vir hom totsiens sê nie, dis te veel vir haar. ’n Stukkie van haar is besig om dood te gaan, die deel wat verkleef geraak het aan die man in haar arms.

Hy vryf oor haar rug. Sy kan sy hart teen haar skouer voel klop. “Ek bel jou sodra ek klaar gewerk het.”

Die muur wat drie jaar gestaan het, is terug. Sy woorde dring nie meer soos voorheen tot in haar hart nie. Sy maak haar arms los en knik. Sy raak vir die eerste keer van die nattigheid op haar wange bewus. Hy vee haar tranes met sy kneukels af. Dan staan hy op en retireer tot by die paadjie, sy oë onlosmaaklik in hare. “Ek sal jou bel.”

Sy stry nie. Sy wil alleen wees om haar gevoelens te orden en die dronk gevoel in haar kop te laat ophou. Sy moet in die spieël kyk en haarself oortuig dat die onmoontlike gebeur het. Clay Michaels het New York toe gekom, haar lewe gered en haar iets laat voel wat sy nog net by Jake gevoel het.

“Moenie, Jamie, asseblief.” Hy gaan staan. “Dit hoef niks te beteken nie. Niks het verander nie.” Sy oë smeek desperaat dat sy die situasie soos hy moet sien, dat hierdie wending, hierdie vreemde toeval nie noodwendig die einde hoef te beteken van dit wat tussen hulle is nie.

“Gaan liewer.” Sy hou haar hand op en volg hom met haar oë totdat hy by die deur uitloop.

Toe hy weg is, weet sy dat dit te laat is. Dit wat hulle ontdek het, is weg. As hulle dit daardie eerste oggend uitgevind het, kon hulle hulself dit alles gespaar het. Want alhoewel sy gereed is om weer te begin lewe, om ’n toekoms sonder Jake in te gaan, kan sy nie ’n verhouding met Eric se broer aanknoop nie.

Nie as dit beteken dat sy Eric weer moet sien nie.

Na alles wat hulle deurgemaak het, het Jamie geweet dat sy van hom moes afsien as sy ooit weer met haar lewe wou voortgaan. Sy moes totsiens sê en nooit weer terugkyk nie.

Nie eens vir sy broer, Clay, nie.

# Chapter TWENTY-ONE

Sue Henning would know what to do.

Jamie picked up Sierra at school and headed straight for her friend's house. She had barely survived the day, convinced it all had to be some sort of bad joke. As long as she'd lived she'd never believed in love at first sight. Until she met Clay.

Their first meeting was like some sort of cosmic metaphor. She, alone and vulnerable, unaware of the dangers that surrounded her. Him, looking out for her, rushing to her rescue, protecting her the way she still needed protecting. He loved God and his country and *The Lion King*. What more could she ask?

Crazy girl, she'd told herself a hundred times that day. She didn't even know him, didn't know his faults other than one: he was impulsive.

The thing was, she'd never been quick with her decision-making. But she'd been drawn to him in a way that kicked common sense out the door. So much so that this morning when he'd asked her about Thanksgiving in California, the idea had seemed practical. Logical, even.

But that was before she knew about Eric.

She gritted her teeth as she rounded the corner to Sue's house. Why would God allow it? Why let them meet, why light the fire in her long-cold heart only to snuff it out this way? *God...You promised You'd see me through this.*

The thought hung in the stale air of her car. A few feet away, Sierra turned and looked at her. "Did you cry today, Mommy?"

Jamie sniffed and shot her daughter a quick glance. "Of course not," she lied.

"Then how come your eyes are puffy?" Sierra's knobby knees stuck out from her woolen jumper, the uniform she wore to school. Poor Sierra. She was still a little girl, her feet not quite touching the floor. She deserved a man like Clay in her life.

“Mommy, how come? How come your eyes are puffy?”

“Mrs. Henning says Katy’s looking forward to seeing you.”

Sierra stared out the car window. “What about Clay? Will we see him today?”

Her words hit her like so many rocks. “I don’t think so.”

The conversation stalled. Jamie turned into Sue’s driveway. Anger welled up in her, anger at God for letting this insane thing happen. She cared about Clay, could easily love him. But being around Eric Michaels would be like being around Jake. Maybe she hadn’t heard God about choosing life. Maybe He wanted her to choose her old life, with Jake’s memory, her obsession with helping the victims of September 11, her work at St. Paul’s.

Maybe she was never supposed to do anything more than thank Clay Michaels.

Sue was waiting out front, arms crossed, leaning against the door frame. Even from fifteen feet away Jamie could read her; she was worried.

Sierra jumped out, waved hello to Sue, and ran inside calling Katy’s name. Jamie felt tired and old, battered by the turn of events. She dragged herself up the walkway and met Sue’s gaze. Jamie hadn’t told her anything except the basics. She’d met someone on the ferryboat, a police officer from California. He was the reason she hadn’t called in a few weeks.

But now things had gone terribly wrong.

“I still can’t believe you didn’t call sooner.” Sue’s words were quiet, muffled by the icy breeze outside. They entered the house and went into the living room. Sue had two cups of tea already poured, waiting.

Jamie sat down across from Sue and clasped her hands. “I wanted to tell you.” She barely lifted her shoulders. “I guess I didn’t know how. I still can’t believe it myself.”

“Do you...do you have feelings for him?”

“I did.” Jamie felt tears in her eyes. She swallowed hard and found her voice again. “I’ve seen him every day since I met him. Whenever he

isn't training or sleeping, he's been with Sierra and me." Jamie told Sue how he'd taken them to *The Lion King* and shared a number of dinners with them. "It was all happening so fast, but it felt real. For the first time since Jake, it felt real."

Sue frowned. "So where's the problem? Jamie, it's been three years. You're allowed to care about someone else."

"You haven't."

"But I would." Sue's voice grew soft. "If God brought someone into my life, I would. I've thought about it lately."

Jamie still hadn't gotten to the most important part, but now she had this to consider. Sue would care about someone else? Date someone else? She'd been thinking about it lately? Maybe they'd both been thinking about it, too afraid to tell the other that they couldn't imagine being alone for the rest of their lives. Even if the idea was unthinkable in light of the men they'd lost.

Sue took a sip of her tea. "What's so bad, Jamie? If it's guilt that's stopping you, let it go. Jake would want you to let it go."

Jake's words filled her heart: *Choose life, Jamie. Whenever you can, choose life.* She closed her eyes. "You don't know the whole story." She blinked and searched her friend's face. "It's the worst thing, Sue. You won't believe it."

Worry colored the fine lines on Sue's forehead. "If he hurt you, he's not the guy you made him out to be."

Jamie shook her head. "No, nothing like that." She slid to the edge of the sofa, her heart beat fast and hard against the wall of her chest. "You remember Eric Michaels?"

Sue squinted. "Eric Michaels?"

"Yes." Jamie exhaled hard. What did she expect? She'd seldom talked about Eric, just telling everyone—even Sue—the straight facts. The man she'd thought was Jake was really a businessman from Los Angeles, a man suffering from amnesia, one who looked enough like Jake to pass for him.

She kept her answers short, and Sue had always known better than to ask. Now she had to revisit that time again—something she'd never wanted to do.

Sue shook her head. "The name's familiar, but I can't figure out why."

"He's the man who lived with me, the one I thought was Jake."

A knowing look filled her face. "Oh, right. Okay." The frown was back. "Why bring him up?"

Jamie felt the blood leaving her face, felt herself reacting to the news as if she were hearing it for the first time again. Her tone was pinched, scratchy. "Clay's his brother."

Seconds passed while Sue processed the news. "Clay, the police officer you met on the ferry, is Eric Michaels's brother?" Her eyebrows lifted and she lowered her chin. "That's impossible."

"That's what I thought." She stood and walked to the window, her back to her friend. The girls were upstairs, playing in Katy's room. Outside the trees were bare, a light snow had fallen the night before, and everything was the color of winter. "It's true, Sue. Clay's his brother. We found out this morning." She looked over her shoulder at Sue. "He saw Jake's picture. A few minutes before he had to leave for his shift."

"Oh, Jamie." Sue's expression relaxed, but her face was taut, pale. "I can't believe it."

"I told him I couldn't see him tonight." She faced the window again. "I can't see him ever again."

Sue was quiet. After a while, Jamie returned to the sofa and drank down half her tea. "I already miss him. I can't believe this is happening." She set her cup down. "There's nothing you can do to help, but I had to tell you."

A minute passed, and then Sue stood and crossed the room to the fireplace. Next to it was a bookshelf, and from a place in the back she pulled out a small urn. Jamie had one like it—given to them by the city.

The urn held a few cups of debris and ash from the collapsed Twin Towers.

With slower steps, Sue carried it back to the coffee table and set it down on a spot between them both. She leveled her gaze at Jamie. “You know why they gave us those urns?”

Where on earth was her friend going with this? She didn’t want to look at the urn or think about what might’ve been inside. The ashy remains of any of the two thousand victims. Jamie had kept hers out of respect for the lives lost that day. But it was hardly a reminder of Larry or Jake. “No.” She shook her head. “Mine’s tucked away somewhere; I don’t look at it.”

“I keep mine out.” She angled her head and looked at the detail on the small container. “It’s a reminder of something that might be easy to forget otherwise.”

“What?” Jamie still didn’t know what the urn had to do with her situation, the one she was battling that day.

“That Larry’s not coming home.” Sue’s voice cracked. “It reminds me that every terrible thing about September 11 really happened. That my husband and your husband were two of the heroes, two of the men who ran up the stairs when everyone else was running down.” She sniffed and pressed her finger to her lip. Sue rarely broke down, and this would be no exception. “Larry’s gone. When his name is on my lips, when I jump up to ask his advice about something or wonder what he might want for dinner, I remember the urn and it’s all real again. He’s gone and he’s not coming home.”

Jamie leaned closer. “I already know that about Jake.” She pressed her fingers against her chest. “I’m the one who’s been dating these past two weeks. I don’t need an urn to remember the truth about Jake. He’s gone; I get that.”

“Yes.” Sue’s voice was even, her eyes unwavering. “But there is something you have trouble remembering.”

“What?” She didn’t come here for a lecture from Sue. “What do I have trouble remembering?”

Sue's voice slipped to a whisper. "That Eric Michaels wasn't Jake. That you didn't lose Jake the day Eric left on an airplane back to California. You lost him in the terrorist attacks, same as the rest of us."

Jamie felt her breath catch. She couldn't breathe, couldn't inhale for the emotions strangling her. She wanted to tell Sue she already knew that about the timing, that she'd lost Jake when the Twin Towers collapsed, same as the other firefighter widows. But she couldn't. Because what Sue had just said made her feel raw and hurt and aching inside.

"Jamie..." Sue's voice was a little louder now, filled with compassion. "Do you understand what I'm saying?"

Her head was spinning, her heart bleeding from wounds that still weren't healed. "Not really."

"So *what* if Eric and Clay are brothers? What does it matter?"

Jamie's heart rate doubled. Panic seized her by the neck and threatened to strangle her. "What does it matter? If Clay and I got close, I'd have to see Eric again." Tears blurred her vision, spilling from a well so deep Jamie barely acknowledged its presence. "I can't do that, Sue, I can't."

Sue wouldn't let up. "Why?"

"Because every time I saw him, I'd feel like I was with Jake."

This time Sue waited, and when she spoke her words were slow, measured. "Eric isn't Jake; he never was." She drew her feet up beside her on the sofa. "I wonder, Jamie. Have you ever worked through the memories you made with that man and told yourself that every single one of them was with a stranger? Have you allowed yourself to take Jake's name off each of those days you and Eric had together?"

Jamie felt the nausea rise inside her, felt her head swimming. She'd done that, hadn't she? Her head knew Jake hadn't come home, that he'd died right beside his best friend when the South Tower collapsed.

But did her heart know? Or had she, by suppressing details of that time, by never taking it out and spreading the memories on a table and



examining them, allowed her heart to believe that Jake *had* come home. That she'd been given some sort of reprieve, a mulligan, a time with Jake, that none of the other survivors got to have with their loved ones.

Was that why she never talked about Eric? Maybe a part of her wanted to believe the man in her house hadn't been Eric at all, but Jake. At least until he'd taken the blood test and they'd known he was someone else.

Jamie stood and realized she was shaking. She needed to be alone, needed to think through this, to shine a light on the darkest corners of her heart. "Can you watch Sierra for a while? I need to go to the beach."

"It's winter, Jamie. It'll be freezing."

"That's okay. I have a coat in the car." The place where she and Jake liked to go was just a few miles from Sue's house. Cold weather wouldn't matter, not when she had so much to work through. "Can you watch her?"

"Yes." Sue stood and came to her. "Can I say something before you go?"

"Go ahead." Jamie's teeth were clattering, not because she was feeling the effects of winter, but because she was about to go places she hadn't gone in three years.

Their eyes locked, and Sue looked as serious as Jamie could remember seeing her. "Maybe God brought Eric into your life so he could become the man *he* needed to be. He was different when he went home, right? Isn't that what you told me?"

Jamie looked at the floor near her feet. "Yes."

"He wasn't supposed to replace Jake." Sue put her hand on Jamie's shoulder. "He was supposed to learn from him. Learn the value of faith and family and friendship."

"Then what about Clay?" Jamie lifted her eyes. "Why would God let me have feelings for Eric's brother?"

"Because." Sue gave her shoulder a gentle squeeze. "Maybe Eric's brother was the man you needed. Not because of Jake or Eric or anyone

else. Just because of Clay.” She hesitated. “Maybe that was part of God’s plan too.”

## Een-en-twintig

Sue Henning sal weet wat om te doen.

Jamie gaan haal Sierra by die skool en ry reguit na haar vriendin se huis toe. Sy het die dag nouliks oorleef en is steeds halfpad oortuig dat die hele storie net ’n aaklige grap was. Sy het haar lewe lank nooit in liefde met die eerste oogopslag geglo nie. Totdat sy Clay ontmoet het.

Hulle eerste ontmoeting was soos ’n soort kosmiese metafoor. Sy, alleen en kwesbaar, onbewus van die gevare rondom haar. Hy, die dapper held wat tot haar redding kom en haar beskerm soos sy steeds nodig het om beskerm te word. Hy is lief vir God en vaderland én *The Lion King*. Sy kon nie vir meer vra nie.

Jou dwaas, het sy haar vandag al ’n honderd keer aangespreek. Sy ken hom nie eens nie; die man se enigste swaakteit waarvan sy weet, is sy impulsiwiteit.

Die feit is, sy was nog nooit iemand wat oorhaastige besluite neem nie. Maar haar aangetrokkenheid tot hom was genoeg om haar gesonde verstand in die wiele te ry. In só ’n mate dat toe hy haar vanoggend gevra het om Kalifornië toe gaan, die idee heeltemal werkbaar geklink het. Selfs logies.

Maar dit was voordat sy van Eric geweet het.

Sy byt op haar tande toe sy by Sue se straat indraai. Hoekom sou die Here dit toelaat? Waarom het Hy hulle laat ontmoet en ’n vlam in haar koue hart aangesteek, net om dit op hierdie manier uit te doof? *Here ... U het belowe dat U my hierdeur sou dra.*

Die gedagte hang vir ’n paar oomblikke in die motor totdat Sierra met haar praat. “Het Mamma gehuil?”

Jamie snuif en kyk vinnig na haar dogtertjie. “Natuurlik nie,” jok sy.

“Nou hoekom is Mamma se oë so gepof?” Sierra se maer knietjies steek onder haar skooluniform uit.

Arme Sierra. Sy is eintlik nog klein; haar voete raak nog nie aan die vloer nie. Sy verdien ’n pa soos Clay in haar lewe.

“Mamma, hoekom? Hoekom is Mamma se oë so pofferig?”

“Tannie Sue sê Katy kan nie wag om jou te sien nie.”

Sierra staar deur die motorvenster. “Wat van oom Clay? Gaan ons hom vandag sien?”

Elke woord tref haar soos ’n klip. “Ek dink nie so nie.”

Die gesprek loop dood. Jamie draai by Sue se oprit in. Sy kan die woede in haar voel opbou, woede teenoor God omdat Hy toegelaat het dat hierdie bisarre ding gebeur. Sy gee om vir Clay, sal hom maklik kan liefkry. Maar om

in Eric Michaels se geselskap te wees, sal wees soos om by Jake te wees. Dalk het sy verkeerd verstaan toe sy gedink het die Here sê sy moet die lewe kies. Dalk wil Hy hê sy moet haar ou lewe kies, die herinneringe aan Jake, haar obsessie om die slagoffers van 11 September te help, haar werk by St. Paul's. Dalk was sy nooit veronderstel om enigiets meer te doen as om vir Clay Michaels dankie te sê nie.

Sue staan teen die deurkosyn vir haar en wag, haar arms gekruis. Jamie het nog nie uitgeklim nie, maar kan van hier af die kommer op haar vriendin se gesig sien.

Sierra spring uit, waai vir Sue en hardloop binnetoe om Katy te gaan soek. Jamie voel moeg en oud, platgeslaan deur wat vanoggend gebeur het. Sy loop stadig in die tuinpaadjie op en ontmoet Sue se oë. Jamie het niks buiten die basiese met haar gedeel nie. Sy het iemand op die veerboot ontmoet, 'n polisieman van Kalifornië. Hy is die rede waarom Sue so lanklaas van haar gehoor het.

Maar nou het alles aaklig verkeerd geloop.

“Ek kan nog steeds nie glo jy het nie vroeër gebel nie.” Sue se stem word weggedra deur 'n ysige briesie. Hulle gaan in en loop deur na die woonkamer. Sy het reeds twee koppies tee geskink.

Jamie gaan sit oorkant Sue, haar hande op haar skoot saamgekleem. “Ek wou vir jou vertel.” Sy lig haar skouers baie effens. “Ek skat ek het nie geweet hoe nie. Ek kan dit self nog nie glo nie.”

“Het jy ... het jy gevoelens vir hom?”

“Ek het gehad.” Jamie se oë raak vol trane. Sy sluk swaar en kry weer haar stem. “Ek het hom elke dag gesien vandat ek hom ontmoet het. Wanneer hy nie besig was met opleiding of geslaap het nie, was hy by my en Sierra.” Jamie vertel Sue dat hy hulle geneem het om *The Lion King* te gaan kyk. “Dit het alles so vinnig gebeur, maar dit het so reg gevoel. Vir die eerste keer na Jake het dit reg gevoel.”

Sue frons. “Nou wat pla? Jamie, dis nou drie jaar. Jy mag maar vir iemand anders omgee.”

“Jy het nog nie.”

“Maar ek sal.” Sue se stem word sag. “As God iemand oor my pad stuur, sal ek. Die laaste tyd wonder ek nogal daaroor.”

Jamie het nog nie by die belangrikste deel van die storie uitgekom nie, maar nou moet sy eers hieroor dink. Sue sê sy sal vir iemand anders lief word. Met iemand anders uitgaan. Dat sy die laaste tyd daaroor wonder. Dalk het hulle albei daaroor gewonder, maar was hulle te bang om vir mekaar te sê dat hulle nie vir die res van hulle lewe alleen wou wees nie. Al was hulle hóé lief vir die mans wat hulle verloor het.

Sue neem 'n slukkie van haar tee. “Wat pla jou so, Jamie? Jy moet ophou om skuldig te voel. Jake sal wil hê jy moet aangaan met jou lewe.”

Jake se woorde kom na haar toe terug: *Kies die lewe, Jamie. Wanneer jy die kans het, kies die lewe.* Sy maak haar oë toe. “Ek het jou nog nie alles vertel

nie.” Sy knip haar oë en kyk soekend na haar vriendin se gesig. “Dis aaklig, Sue. Jy gaan dit nie glo nie.”

’n Bekommerde frons verskyn op Sue se voorkop. “As hy jou seergemaak het, is hy nie die man wat jy gedink het hy is nie.”

Jamie skud haar kop. “Nee, dis iets anders.” Sy skuif tot op die punt van haar sitplek, haar hartklop swaar. “Onthou jy vir Eric Michaels?”

Sue skreef haar oë. “Eric Michaels?”

“Ja.” Jamie blaas haar asem uit. Wat het sy verwag? Sy het selde oor Eric gepraat buiten om die basiese feite bekend te maak. Die man wat sy gedink het Jake was, was eintlik ’n sakeman van Los Angeles wat aan geheueverlies gely het en Jake se identiese tweeling kon wees. Sy het haar antwoorde kort gehou en Sue het van beter geweet as om uit te vra. Nou moet sy daardie deel van haar lewe weer gaan besoek – iets wat sy nooit wou doen nie.

Sue skud haar kop. “Die naam lui ’n klokkie, maar ek kan hom nie plaas nie.”

“Dis die man wat by my gebly het, die een wat ek gedink het Jake was.”

Begrip daag in haar vriendin se oë. “O, ja. Oukei.” Die frons is terug. “Wat het hy hiermee te doen?”

Jamie voel die kleur uit haar gesig verdwyn, voel asof syself die nuus vir die eerste keer hoor. Haar stem is yl en skor. “Clay is sy broer.”

Dis lank stil terwyl Sue die nuus laat insink. “Clay, die polisieman wat jy op die veerboot ontmoet het, is Eric Michaels se broer?” Haar wenkbroue lig en sy laat sak haar ken. “Dis onmoontlik.”

“Ek het ook so gedink.” Sy staan op en gaan staan voor die venster met haar rug na haar vriendin. Die dogtertjies speel bo in Katy se kamer. Buitekant is die bome kaal en alles lê wit onder die ligte sneeu wat die vorige nag geval het. “Dis waar, Sue. Clay is sy broer. Ons het vanoggend uitgevind.” Sy kyk oor haar skouer na Sue. “Hy het Jake se foto gesien. ’n Paar minute voor hy by die werk moes wees.”

“Ag, Jamie.” Sue frons nie meer nie, maar haar gesig is strak en bleek. “Ek kan dit nie glo nie.”

“Ek het vir hom gesê dat ek hom nie vanaand kan sien nie.” Sy kyk weer deur die venster. “Ek kan hom nooit weer sien nie.”

Sue is stil. Na ’n rukkie kom sit Jamie weer op die bank en drink die helfte van haar tee. “Ek mis hom alreeds. Ek kan nie glo dis besig om te gebeur nie.”

Sy sit haar koppie neer. “Daar’s niks wat jy kan doen om te help nie, maar ek moes met jou praat.”

’n Paar oomblikke gaan verby en toe staan Sue op en loop na ’n boekrak langs die kaggel. Sy haal ’n urn uit wat agter op een van die rakke staan. Jamie het net so een – ’n geskenk van die stadsowerheid. Die urn bevat ’n paar koppies puin en as van die Twin Towers.

Sue stap stadig terug en sit dit op die tafel tussen hulle neer. Sy kyk in Jamie se oë. “Weet jy waarom hulle hierdie urns vir ons gegee het?”

Waarheen is haar vriendin hiermee op pad? Sy wil nie na die urn kyk of dink wat daarin kan wees nie. Die oorblyfsels van enige van die tweeduisend

slagoffers. Jamie het hare gehou uit respek vir die lewens wat daardie dag verloor is. Maar dit dien nie vir haar as herinnering aan Larry of Jake nie. “Nee.” Sy skud haar kop. “Ek’t myne iewers ingedruk; ek kyk nie daarna nie.”

“Ek hou myne waar ek dit kan sien.” Sy hou haar kop skeef en kyk na die detail op die klein houertjie. “Dit herinner my aan iets wat ek andersins dalk kon vergeet.”

“Wat?” Jamie weet nog steeds nie wat die urn met haar situasie te doen het nie.

“Dat Larry nie huis toe kom nie.” Sue se stem breek. “Dit herinner my dat al die aaklige goed van 11 September regtig gebeur het. Dat my en jou man twee van die helde was, twee van die manne wat boontoe gehardloop het terwyl al die ander mense uit die torings gevlug het.” Sy snuif en druk haar vinger oor haar mond. Sue huil nie sommer nie, en sy is ook nie van plan om nou te begin nie. “Larry is weg. Wanneer sy naam op my lippe is, wanneer ek opspring om sy raad te vra of wonder wat hy vir ete wil hê, dink ek aan die urn en word dit weer ’n werklikheid. Hy is weg en hy kom nie huis toe nie.”

Jamie leun nader. “Ek weet dit reeds van Jake.” Sy druk met haar hand op haar bors. “Ek’s die een wat die laaste twee weke uitgegaan het. Ek het nie ’n urn nodig om te onthou wat met Jake gebeur het nie. Hy is weg; ek weet dit.”

“Ja.” Sue se stem is gelykmatig, haar oë vas. “Maar daar is een ding wat jy sukkel om te onthou.”

“Wat?” Sy het nie hiernatoe gekom dat Sue vir haar kan preek nie. “Wat sukkel ek om te onthou?”

Sue antwoord in ’n fluisterstem. “Dat Eric Michaels nie Jake is nie. Dat jy Jake nie verloor het toe Eric op ’n vliegtuig geklim het en Kalifornië toe is nie. Nes almal van ons het jy hom in die terroriste-aanvalle verloor.”

Jamie voel kortasem. Sy kan nie asemhaal nie, nie met die emosies wat haar keel toedruk nie. Sy wil vir Sue sê dat sy dit reeds weet. Sy weet dat sy Jake met die ineenstorting van die Twin Towers verloor het, nes die ander weduwees. Maar sy kan nie. Want wat Sue pas gesê het, laat haar binneste rou en seer en stukkend voel.

“Jamie ...” Haar stem is vol deernis. “Verstaan jy wat ek probeer sê?”

Haar kop draai en die wonde wat nog nie genees het nie, voel skielik rou.

“Nie regtig nie.”

“Wat is so verskriklik daaraan? Wat maak dit regtig saak dat Eric en Clay broers is?”

Jamie se hart klop oortyd. ’n Paniekerigheid kry haar aan die keel beet en dreig om haar te verwurg. “Wat maak dit saak? As ek en Clay ernstig raak, sal ek Eric weer moet sien.” Haar trane kom uit ’n put in haar binneste waarvan Jamie nie eens geweet het nie. “Ek kan dit nie doen nie, Sue. Ek kan nie.”

Sy pols verder. “Hoekom nie?”

“Want elke keer wanneer ek hom sien, sal dit voel asof ek by Jake is.”

Hierdie keer wag Sue, en toe sy praat, is haar woorde stadig, afgemete. “Eric

is nie Jake nie; hy was nooit nie.” Sy trek haar voete onder haar in. “Ek wonder, Jamie. Het jy ooit deur die herinneringe gewerk wat jy saam met daardie man geskep het, en vir jouself gesê dat elkeen van hulle met ’n vreemdeling was? Het jy Jake se naam geskrap van alles wat jy en Eric gedeel het?”

Jamie voel skielik naar en lighoofdig. Sy het dit tog gedoen, of hoe? Met haar kop weet sy dat Jake nie huis toe gekom het nie, dat hy langs sy beste vriend dood is toe die suidelike toring inmekaargestort het.

Maar weet sy dit met haar hart? Of het sy die besonderhede van daardie tyd onderdruk, haar herinneringe nooit op ’n tafel uitgepak en bestudeer nie? Het sy haar hart toegelaat om te glo dat Jake wel huis toe gekom het? Dat sy ’n soort genadetyd saam met Jake ontvang het wat nie een van die ander oorlewendes met hulle geliefdes gehad het nie?

Is dit waarom sy nooit oor Eric praat nie? Dalk is daar iets in haar hart wat wil glo dat die man in haar huis nie Eric was nie, maar Jake. Tot op die dag van die bloedtoetse, in elk geval, toe hulle uitgevind het dat hy iemand anders was.

Jamie staan op en besef dat sy bewe. Sy wil alleen wees om hieroor na te dink, om lig op die donkerste hoeke van haar hart te werp. “Kan jy ’n rukkie na Sierra kyk? Ek wil strand toe gaan.”

“Dis winter, Jamie. Dit gaan vriesend wees.”

“Dis oukei. Ek het ’n jas in die kar.” Die plek waarheen sy en Jake so graag gegaan het, is net ’n paar kilometer van Sue se huis af. Die koue sal nie pla nie, nie terwyl daar soveel is waardeur sy moet werk nie. “Kan sy ’n rukkie hier bly?”

“Ja.” Sue staan op en kom na haar toe. “Kan ek iets sê voor jy ry?”

“Sê maar.” Jamie se tande klapper opmekaar, nie omdat sy koud kry nie, maar omdat sy ’n boek moet gaan oopmaak wat sy drie jaar gelede vir goed toegemaak het.

Hulle oë ontmoet en Sue lyk ernstiger as wat Jamie haar al ooit gesien het. “Dalk het die Here Eric in jou lewe ingebring sodat hy die man kan word wat hý veronderstel is om te wees. As ek reg onthou, het jy vir my gesê dat hy anders was toe hy huis toe gegaan het.”

Jamie kyk na die vloer voor haar voete. “Ja.”

“Hy was nie veronderstel om Jake te vervang nie.” Sue plaas haar hand op Jamie se skouer. “Hy was veronderstel om by hom te leer. Om te leer wat die waarde van geloof en vriendskap en familie is.”

“Wat dan van Clay?” Jamie kyk op. “Waarom het die Here toegelaat dat ek op Eric se broer verlief raak?”

“Want.” Sue gee haar skouer ’n sagte drukkie. “Dalk was Eric se broer die man wat jy nodig het. Nie oor Jake of Eric of enigiemand anders nie. Net oor Clay.” Sy aarsel. “Dalk was dit ook deel van God se plan.”

# Chapter TWENTY-TWO

It was almost dusk when Jamie walked across the sand to the spot where she and Jake had set out their chairs and towels so many times before. This time she brought nothing with her, just pulled her long coat tight around her and eased down to the sand. Her eyes found a pale blue section of sky. “God...what is this feeling in my heart?”

When she remembered the three months after the terrorist attacks, one day stood out as changing everything. The day they went to the hospital and discovered the man living with her didn’t have Jake’s blood type. From that point on, Jamie had grieved. No longer could she spend every moment teaching the man in the downstairs bedroom how to be Jake, how to think like him and pray like him and father like him. How to love like him.

From that point on she knew a stranger was living with her, and it was up to her to care enough to help him find his way home. She had understood, hadn’t she? When she said good-bye at LaGuardia she was saying good-bye to a nice man, a stranger named Eric Michaels. Jake was already dead.

But what about those twelve weeks when he’d *been* Jake to her in every way but one? When she longed for him and took him to church and held his hand?

A breeze rolled off the water and brushed against her cheeks. Could it be that she still savored memories of that time as if he wasn’t a stranger at all but Jake?

She pulled her knees up to her chin and stared at the harbor. Had she done the thing Sue asked? Had she consciously told herself the truth about those weeks? That Jake hadn’t been with them, hadn’t sat beside her at the breakfast table, or cooked up blueberry pancakes for Sierra?

A deep ache began within her, and with it came a realization: if she could admit the truth about Eric, her fears about seeing him again were

unfounded. If she could admit he'd never been Jake. Not for the first few days after the terrorist attacks. Not for the first few weeks or months.

Not at all.

"God," her voice took wind. "I was mad at You...but it wasn't Your fault, was it?"

She looked up. If only God would give her a sign, something to tell her He was still on her side. A single seagull soared into view and dipped toward the ocean. For a moment, Jamie felt sorry for the bird, making his way through a late winter afternoon alone, without a friend or a mate.

But almost at the same time, she saw another seagull swoop down and join the first. Jamie blinked against the cold air and felt the burn of moisture in the corner of her eyes. The bird wasn't alone, after all.

But she was, and all because she had believed in some dark hallway of her heart that Eric really was Jake; that she hadn't lost her husband in the collapse of the Twin Towers, but three months later. And yet, Eric wasn't Jake. No matter how much he looked like him or learned to act like him, he never could be.

Her heart splintered, and she bowed her head. "I'm sorry, God. I'm so sorry."

Remorse filled her. Remorse and guilt and understanding.

Remorse, because she'd never had Jake a minute past the time when he told her good-bye and headed off for work September 11; guilt, because how dare she believe another man to be Jake—even under the strangest circumstances; and understanding, because Sue was right. Jamie realized that now.

She'd never gone through the memories of those twelve weeks one at a time and painted in Eric's name, his face and likeness. She'd been okay with keeping that time locked up in her heart, protected from scrutiny so she didn't have to admit to herself that Jake had never been a part of any of it.

The sky was getting darker, colder. If she was going to unlock that



time in her life and give it a proper burial, she needed to move quickly.

She started with the afternoon of September 11, the moment she got the call from Sergeant Riker. Jake was alive, he told her. Alive and hurt and at Mount Sinai Medical Center. After a day of desperate fear and worry, the news gave Jamie permission to breathe again.

The memory filled in, and she pictured herself responding to the amazing news. The telephone receiver fell slowly to her lap as she screamed her husband's name. He was alive! Relief, like a gust of air, filled a room where she'd been suffocating. Jake hadn't been in the South Tower after all. He was alive! Just like he'd promised!

Jamie held her breath and looked out to sea.

She exhaled, shaking. Sergeant Riker went on to tell her that Captain Hisel was searching the rubble at Ground Zero when he found Jake beneath a fire truck.

Awe filled Jamie's mind now as she realized the truth. She'd never quite convinced herself that Aaron hadn't found Jake there that day. But now she didn't want to miss a moment, had to remove Jake from every one of the places where he didn't belong.

Eric Michaels had been coming down the stairs, escaping the building when the tower collapsed. The force had sent him—not Jake—underneath the fire truck. Which meant that the man Aaron Hisel saw and helped and sent to the hospital wasn't Jake, either.

The hurt was so bad. Jamie remembered, years ago, when Jake broke his arm playing football in high school. He hadn't wanted to wear a cast because it might limit his playing time. So he continued on with the pain, not telling his parents or anyone else how bad it was.

But then he began to notice a bend in his forearm, a bend and a bump that finally his family doctor spotted. By then only one thing could be done to fix the arm. Rebreak it and let it heal correctly.

That's exactly how she felt now.

She'd let her heart heal in the wrong position, believing at least on

some level that those memories of late September, October, and November still involved Jake. Now—with a pain that knew no bounds, she was letting God break her heart again so that it might heal correctly.

Jamie wasn't sure she could continue. But she had no choice. She dug to another level, the moment she rushed into the hospital room, certain Jake had survived, the hours she'd held vigil at his bedside, the days of stroking his hand, whispering to him, and begging him to wake up.

Jake hadn't been there for any of it.

Not when Sierra saw him for the first time, and he remembered her name. Eric had merely run into Jake in the stairwell and by some bizarre series of events, he'd seen the inside of Jake's helmet. The place where he'd kept a photo of Sierra and her name written below it.

Eric saw it and remembered it that day in the hospital.

Jamie no longer felt the cold air around her. Her battered heart took up all her energy, her determination to remove Jake from those moments after September 11 wore on her, leaving gaping wounds at her very core.

She kept on, working through the homecoming from the hospital. The man who rode the ferry with her and sang with Sierra, the man who stared at their wedding portrait and gasped, convinced he was in the picture. All of it took place with Eric Michaels.

One at a time Jamie continued, dissecting memories, painstakingly removing Jake and placing Eric there instead. Halfway through the process, she felt drops of water on her arms. She was crying and she hadn't even known it. She'd been too absorbed in the matter at hand to acknowledge how much it all hurt.

When she finished—when she staggered to her feet, dusted off the sand, and peered through the dusky evening toward the water one last time—the hole in her heart was so big she felt hollow, as if people could see straight through her. She walked closer to the shore, close enough so she could bend down and get her fingers wet.

“Jake...” Her voice was hoarse, raspy. This was where she liked to

come to connect with him, to touch the water where the two of them had played so often together.

But everything was different, maybe because she had a firm grasp on the truth. The water wasn't warm and inviting, it was freezing cold, the same way her empty heart felt. She stood and slipped her wet fingers deep into the pocket of her coat.

Now came the hardest part.

She took herself back further than before, back to the week and days and hours before September 11. Back to her life with her husband. The jet skiing with Sue and Larry and the little girls, the small ceramic figurine of an angel she'd painted for him the Sunday before the attacks, the hugging and laughing and lovemaking.

Though her head knew the truth since Eric's blood test, her heart needed to understand once and for all. *Those* were her final days with Jake. That Tuesday morning, waking up beside him, wanting him to stay and go to the zoo with her and Sierra, wishing he'd play hooky and skip work for the day.

And then watching him consider the idea and decide instead to go to work. Tomorrow, he'd told her. They could play together tomorrow. Then her promising to get Chinese food for dinner and one last kiss, a final quick good-bye. Hearing him head down the hall to Sierra's room, enjoying his laughter as Sierra asked him for butterfly kisses and Jake promised to play horsie with her when he got home.

That was the end, his final moments with them.

She straightened and let her coat ease open, let the wind off the water blow over her, taking with it the remaining shards of her denial. This should have been the hardest part, the time when she would turn away and head for the car, so hollow and empty she could barely support herself.

And she was empty, no doubt. But through her tears, she could feel God doing something inside her, knitting her broken heart back together again. Correctly this time. She turned and trudged through the sand, a

grieving widow leaving the scene of a burial. But amid the pain and loss and acceptance working its way through her was something else, something she hadn't expected.

Hope.

Because the emptiness meant Eric was no longer living in her heart, masquerading as Jake. And if Eric wasn't living in her heart, then maybe someday she could handle seeing him again. Not as Jake's substitute, a man she had wanted to keep as her own even after she knew the truth about his identity. Next time—if there was a next time—she wouldn't see him as Jake Bryan's double.

But as Clay Michaels's brother.

## **Twee-en-twintig**

Dis amper skemer toe Jamie oor die sand koers kry na die plek waar sy en Jake so baie maal hulle strandstoele en handdoeke uitgepak het. Hierdie keer het sy niks saamgebring nie, en sy trek haar jas stywer om haar skouers voor sy op die sand neersak. Haar oë dwaal op in die bleekblou lug. "Here ... wat is hierdie gevoel in my hart?"

Wanneer sy aan die drie maande ná die terroriste-aanvalle dink, is daar een dag wat as 'n draaipunt uitstaan. Die dag toe hulle hospitaal toe gegaan het en ontdek het dat die man wat by haar gebly het, nie Jake se bloedgroep gehad het nie. Daardie dag het Jamie begin treur. Sy moes ophou om die man in die gastekamer te leer om Jake te wees, om soos hy te dink, soos hy te bid en soos hy pa te wees. Om soos hy lief te hê.

Van toe af het sy geweet 'n vreemdeling bly by haar, en dat sy genoeg vir hom moet omgee om hom te help om weer by die huis uit te kom. Natuurlik het sy verstaan. Die dag toe sy hom by die lughawe gegroet het, het sy 'n gawe man, 'n vreemdeling met die naam Eric Michaels gegroet. Jake was reeds dood.

Maar wat van die twaalf weke waartydens hy in amper elke opsig wél Jake was? Waartydens sy na hom gesmag het en hom kerk toe geneem het en sy hand vasgehou het?

Die briesie is koud op haar wange. Is dit moontlik dat sy daardie tyd steeds onthou asof hy nie 'n vreemdeling was nie, maar Jake?

Sy trek haar knieë op en staar na die hawe. Het sy gedoen wat Sue gesê het? Het sy haarself bewustelik met die waarheid rondom daardie weke gekonfronteer? Dat Jake nie by hulle was nie, dat hy nie langs haar aan tafel

gesit het of plaatkoekies vir Sierra gebak het nie?

'n Diep hartseer ontspring in haar en daarmee saam kom die besef: As sy die waarheid rondom Eric teenoor haarself kan erken, is haar vrese oor 'n weersiens ongegrond. As sy kan erken dat hy nooit Jake was nie. Nie vir die eerste paar dae ná die terroriste-aanvalle nie. Nie vir die eerste paar weke of maande nie.

Glad nie.

"Here," kom haar stem skor. "Ek was kwaad vir U ... maar dit was nie u skuld nie, nê?"

Sy kyk op. As die Here maar net vir haar 'n teken wou gee, iets sodat sy weet dat Hy steeds aan haar kant is. Haar oog vang 'n seemeeu wat alleen deur die lug sweef en dan na die water kantel. Vir 'n oomblik voel Jamie jammer vir die voël wat die wintermiddag alleen, sonder 'n maat, trotseer.

Maar amper terselfdertyd sien sy 'n tweede meeu afduik en by die eerste een aansluit. Jamie knip haar oë teen die koue lug en voel die branderigheid van trane. Die voël is toe tog nie alleen nie.

Maar sy is, en dit omdat sy iewers bly glo het dat Eric wel Jake was; dat sy haar man nie in die ineenstorting van die torings verloor het nie, maar drie maande later. Die feit is egter Eric was nie Jake nie. Maak nie saak hoe baie hy na haar oorlede man gelyk het of hoe goed hy geleer het om soos hy op te tree nie.

Haar hart versplinter en sy laat sak haar kop. "Ek's jammer, Here. Ek's so jammer."

Sy raak bewus van 'n diep berou. Berou en skuldgevoelens en begrip.

Berou, want sy het Jake nooit weer gesien nadat hy haar 11 September gegroet het en werk toe gegaan het nie; skuldgevoelens omdat sy durf glo het dat iemand anders Jake was – selfs onder die vreemdste omstandighede; en begrip omdat Sue reg was. Jamie besef dit nou.

Sy het nooit gaan sit en daardie herinneringe een vir een opgediep en dit met Eric se naam, sy gesig en persoonlikheid ingekleur nie. Sy het daardie tyd in haar hart weggesluit sodat sy nie teenoor haarself moes erken dat Jake nooit daaraan deel gehad het nie.

Dit raak donkerder, kouer. As sy daardie tyd wil ontsluit en behoorlik wil afskeid neem, moet sy dit gou doen.

Sy begin by die middag van 11 September, die oomblik toe sersant Riker gebel het. Jake lewe, het hy gesê. Hy is beseer en by die Mount Sinai Medical Center opgeneem. Ná 'n dag se desperate vrees en kommer het die nuus gemaak dat Jamie weer kon asemhaal.

Die herinnering ontvou verder en sy sien weer hoe sy op die ongelooflike nuus reageer het. Die gehoorstuk het op haar skoot geval toe sy haar man se naam uitroep. Hy het geleef! Die verligting was soos 'n vlag vars lug in 'n vertrek waar sy besig was om te versmoor. Jake was nie in die suidelike toring nie. Hy het geleef! Nes hy belowe het!

Jamie hou haar asem op en kyk na die see.

Sy bewe toe sy uitasem. Sersant Riker het gesê dat kaptein Hisel Jake onder 'n brandweerwa in die puin by Ground Zero opgespoor het.

Dis met ontsag en verwondering dat die waarheid tot Jamie deurdring. Sy het haarself nooit regtig oortuig dat dit nie Jake was wat daardie dag deur Aaron opgespoor is nie. Maar nou durf sy nie een herinnering oorslaan nie; sy moet Jake uit al die plekke verwyder waar hy nie hoort nie.

Eric Michaels was op pad uit die gebou toe die toring ineengestort het. Die impak het hom – nie Jake nie – onder die brandweerwa ingeslinger. Wat beteken dat die man wat Aaron Hisel gesien en gehelp en hospitaal toe gestuur het, nie Jake was nie.

Dit maak seer, nes sy geweet het dit sou. Jamie onthou hoe Jake sy arm tydens 'n voetbalwedstryd op hoërskool gebreek het. Hy wou dit nie laat spalk nie, want dit sou sy speelyd verkort. Hy het ondanks die pyn verder gespeel sonder om sy ouers of die afrigter te sê hoe erg dit was.

Maar later het hy 'n knop in sy voorarm raakgesien, 'n knop wat uiteindelik ook deur hulle huisdokter opgemerk is. Teen daardie tyd was daar net een manier om die arm te herstel. Hulle sou dit weer moes breek en dit korrek laat aangroei.

Dis presies hoe sy nou voel.

Sy het haar hart verkeerd laat genees met dié dat sy tog geglo het daardie herinneringe aan laat September, Oktober en November het steeds haar man ingesluit. Nou is dit asof sy met 'n oneindige pyn toelaat dat die Here haar hart opnuut breek sodat dit behoorlik kan genees.

Jamie is nie seker of sy kan voortgaan nie. Maar sy het nie 'n keuse nie. Sy delf tot by die oomblik toe sy die hospitaalkamer binnegestorm het, oortuig dat Jake oorleef het, die dae waarin sy langs sy bed gewaak het, sy hand vasgehou het en hom fluisterend gesmeek het om wakker te word.

Jake was nie daar nie.

Nie toe Sierra hom die eerste keer gesien het en hy haar naam onthou het nie. Jake het Eric in die trapkuil opgehelp en op 'n bisarre manier het Eric die binnekant van Jake se veiligheidshelm gesien waar 'n foto van Sierra met haar naam vasgeplak was.

Eric het dit gesien en daardie dag in die hospitaal onthou.

Jamie is nie meer bewus van die koue nie. Haar stukkende hart verg al haar energie. Die inspanning om Jake uit al daardie oomblikke sedert 11 September te verwyder, is uitmergelend en laat haar binneste met gapende wonde.

Sy beur voort deur die tuiskoms nadat hy uit die hospitaal ontslaan is. Die man wat by haar op die veerboot was en saam met Sierra gesing het, die man wat geskok na hulle troufoto gekyk het en geglo het dat hy in die foto was ... Daardie man was Eric Michaels.

Een vir een dissekter Jamie haar herinneringe en maak sy seker dat sy Jake telkens met Eric vervang.

Halfpad deur die proses voel sy 'n nattigheid op haar arms. Sy het nie eens

besef dat sy huil nie. Sy was so verdiep in die ontknoping van haar herinneringe dat die seer onopgemerk gekom het.

Toe sy klaar is – toe sy moeisaam opstaan, die sand afvryf en vir 'n laaste keer in die aandskemer na die water kyk – is die gat in haar binneste só groot dat sy heeltemal hol voel, asof 'n mens deur haar kan sien. Sy loop tot by die water sodat sy kan kniel en haar vingers kan natmaak.

“Jake ... ” Haar stem is 'n skor fluistering. Sy het altyd hierheen gekom om naby hom te voel, om aan die water te raak waarin hulle twee so dikwels kom swem het.

Maar alles is anders, dalk omdat sy nou 'n ferm greep op die waarheid het. Die water is glad nie warm en aanloklik nie; dis net so ysig koud soos haar leë hart. Sy staan op en steek haar nat vingers diep in haar jas se sak.

Nou vir die swaarste gedeelte.

Sy neem haarself terug na die week en dae en ure voor 11 September. Na haar lewe saam met haar man. Die dag toe hulle saam met Sue en Larry en die klein dogtertjies kom waterponie ry het, die klein engelbeeldjie wat sy die Sondagoggend voor die aanvalle vir Jake geverf het, die omhelsings en lag en liefkosings.

Alhoewel sy sedert die bloedtoets met haar kop geweet het dat Eric nie Jake was nie, moet die waarheid nou eens en vir altyd tot haar hart deurdring. Dit was haar laaste week saam met Jake. Daardie Dinsdagoggend toe sy langs hom wakker geword het en hom gesmeek het om by die huis te bly en saam met haar en Sierra dieretuin toe te gaan.

Sy sien weer hoe hy dit oorweeg en dan besluit om werk toe te gaan. Môre, het hy vir haar gesê. Môre kan hulle die dag saam geniet. Sy het belowe om Chinese kos te kry en dan 'n laaste soen, 'n finale, vinnige totsiens. Sy hoor hoe hy by Sierra se kamer ingaan en lag toe Sierra vir 'n vlindersoentjie vra en hoe hy belowe om saam met haar te speel wanneer hy die aand by die huis kom.

Dit was die einde, sy laaste oomblikke by hulle.

Sy laat haar jas stadig oopval en toe die wind oor haar waai, is dit asof die laaste skerwe van haar ontkenning saam met die wind wegwaai. Hierdie oomblikke was veronderstel om die heel moeilikste te wees. Sy was seker dat sy nou sou wegdraai en na haar motor toe loop, so leeg en hol dat sy skaars kon regop bly.

En ja, sy is leeg. Maar deur haar trane ervaar sy hoe God iets in haar binneste doen, hoe Hy die flarde van haar gebroke hart weer aanmekaarwerk. Hierdie keer op die regte manier. Sy draai om en loop swaar deur die sand, 'n treurende weduwee wat van 'n graf af wegloop. Maar te midde van die pyn en verlies en aanvaarding, raak sy van iets anders bewus, iets wat sy nie verwag het nie.

Hoop.

Want die leegheid beteken dat Eric nie meer as 'n afskaduwing van Jake in haar hart lewe nie. En as Eric nie meer in haar hart lewe nie, sal sy eendag

dalk in staat wees om hom weer te sien. Nie as Jake se plaaservanger nie; nie 'n man aan wie sy wou vashou selfs nadat sy identiteit bekend geraak het nie. Wanneer – indien – sy hom weer sien, sal sy hom nie as Jake Bryan se dubbelganger sien nie.

Maar as Clay Michaels se broer.



# Chapter TWENTY-THREE

Clay and his partner were five minutes from the scene of the crime.

A drug lord had been shot in the head in a busy alley on the lower East Side, and the trail was getting colder by the hour. The NYPD detective force had a good idea that the key suspect was an ex-con who headed up a rival drug ring, but so far they had no proof.

Four of the detectives-in-training—including Clay and his buddy—had been selected to conduct street interviews with the New York detectives. Fan out, talk to regulars at a few of the taverns, chat with the locals and street vendors. That type of investigation almost always netted witnesses or leads that would help in the investigation.

Clay had no idea how he'd stay focused.

"You're quiet." Joe was in the backseat with him; two NYPD officers were in the front seat holding their own conversation.

"Yeah." Clay stared out his window.

"Jamie again?"

Clay turned and met his friend's eyes. "Is it that obvious?" He hadn't told Joe all the details, just that something had gone wrong, and he and Jamie weren't speaking. Not that Clay hadn't tried.

"Yep, it is." Joe pursed his lips and stared straight ahead. "As obvious as it is for me."

"I think Wanda will come around." Clay swallowed thoughts of his own heartache and thought of his partner. Joe hadn't seen Wanda in a few days, either. Ever since his breakdown after seeing Wanda's little boy—the one who looked exactly like the child they lost.

"She doesn't know what to say; I don't either. I told her I was sorry, but it's not enough. It's like she doesn't believe it."

Clay waited. They were almost at the alley, the one where the murder had taken place. "I still say she'll come around." He looked at his friend. "You belong together."

“Same as you and Jamie.” Joe was the office cutup, dry and never missing a chance to get a laugh. Until now. Now his voice was quiet, even tender. “I’ve watched you after you’ve been with her, man. She’s got you good. You can take a few days off from talking to her, but that won’t change a thing. Your kind of gotcha doesn’t go away ever.”

Clay narrowed his eyes. Every inch of his heart ached for Jamie, but he couldn’t do a thing about it. He’d called her twice a day each day since that terrible morning. Now he was leaving in a few days, and they hadn’t even had a chance to say good-bye. Could that have been God’s plan? Let them meet and feel something for each other that they’d never felt with anyone else, only to find out it was all for nothing?

The hardest part was Eric.

Clay had called him that Monday night, the day he’d found out the truth. Eric had answered the phone, upbeat. Maybe a little too upbeat. “So, little brother, how’re you doing?”

“Been better.” An awkward silence played over the phone line. That’s when Clay knew; with a sixth sort of brotherly sense, he knew. Eric had been worrying about this since their last phone call, worrying that maybe by some horrible twist of fate, Clay’s Jamie was actually Jamie Bryan.

“Yeah, well, training’s almost done.” Eric cleared his throat. “Hey, uh, tell me, Clay. What’s the name of that girl you’re seeing? The one you met on the ferry. You know, from Staten Island?”

“Why didn’t you ask me the first time I called?” Clay tried to keep the bitterness from his voice. It wasn’t Eric’s fault. A sad chuckle eased through his lips. “You guessed it, right?”

Shock crept into Eric’s tone. “What’s her name, Clay?”

“Jamie Bryan.” Clay stared at the ceiling of his hotel room. “That’s her, right? The woman you lived with.”

It was, of course.

Eric could no more believe the strange coincidence than Clay or Jamie could. What were the odds that Clay would go to New York City

and fall in love with the woman who for three months had played the role of Eric's wife?

Before the phone call ended, Eric tried to tell Clay it didn't matter, that they could all get past the strangeness of having Jamie Bryan around for Thanksgiving. But Clay could hear the doubt in his brother's voice. Eric didn't want a reunion with Jamie anymore than she wanted one with him.

And so Clay had lost again; lost to his brother twice.

This time so much worse than with Laura. Back in high school, he'd had a shot at dating Laura long before Eric entered the picture. But he hadn't been sure, hadn't been bowled over the way he wanted to be. Really, it was only after Eric started dating Laura that Clay became more interested.

Then, after September 11, when it looked like Eric was dead, Clay was convinced God had a plan for Laura and him to finally wind up together. But even then his feelings for her were more along the lines of brotherly love and deep concern.

Yes, he was attracted to Laura.

But he was blown away by Jamie Bryan.

The police car pulled over just outside the alley, and the detective at the wheel turned off the engine. "It's four o'clock." He looked at the other men in the car. "We have an hour before dusk, and that's about all we want. You know the routine." He grinned, his eyes hard and focused. "Get in, get the information, and get out. People know what happened." He patted his holster. "Be aware of your weapon, especially as the sun starts to set. The killer's loose. If it's the man we think it is, then his cronies are probably still around. It's no secret that they're packing more than dime bags of weed." He gave them a final look and nodded at his partner in the passenger seat. "We'll take the west side. Stay in pairs."

They climbed out of the car, and the detective and his partner crossed the alley. All four men were uniformed, armed, and carrying pens and

notebooks. Joe turned to Clay and raised his eyebrow. “Man, you know what time it is?”

Clay fell in step beside him. “Late and getting later.”

This time Joe shook his head. “Nope. Time to forget the women for a while.”

The first establishment was a shoddy strip bar with no windows—typical for a back alley entrance. Though the shooting took place at the opposite end of the alleyway, they would try everyone they could find in a hundred-yard radius.

Clay pushed the door open and took a few seconds for his eyes to adjust to the darkness. He was immediately hit by a thick wall of cigarette smoke.

Joe nudged him. “Cockroach trap.” He kept his voice low. “Buncha dirty old bugs who can’t stand the light.”

“That’s for sure.” Clay could see better now, but not much. The blue smoke was thick inside, and a heavy beat, loud and pulsing, filled the air. Neon lights spun and roved around a dimly lit stage where someone was dancing. Clay didn’t look; he never did. Instead, when his job took him to places like this, he remembered Scriptures that spoke of evil being done in the darkness, and how the darkness can’t stand the light.

Once, when he was a kid, Clay stumbled onto his father’s *Playboy* magazine collection. Even back then something in his spirit had reeled at the idea. Made him sick to his stomach. His father looked at naked women? Women other than his mother?

As he got older, his faith solidified the feelings he’d had as a boy. Women dancing in a place like this didn’t interest him. They made him sad, sorry for whatever experience had led the dancer through the doors in the first place.

The bartender was staring at them. He was bald with a single thick hoop earring and a tight T-shirt. He grunted at them. “Can I help you?”

Joe took the lead. “Guess you heard about the murder.” He strolled

toward the bar. “The one at the other end of the street?”

The bartender picked up a wet glass and buffed it with a dish towel. He never took his eyes from Joe’s. “Well, Officer.” His voice was measured. “Can’t say that I did.”

Clay shifted his weight, studying the man. He knew something, no doubt. But as they’d expected, he wasn’t talking. People didn’t simply open up and start spilling details to detectives. They had to be coaxed.

Joe had a reputation for brilliant coaxing.

“Right.” He sat down and patted the stool next to him.

Clay took that seat and glanced at the few patrons sitting alone at dark tables. Joe would ask the questions; he would cover. “We’ll take a couple of waters.”

The bartender scowled. He grabbed two glasses, filled them with water and slid them across the bar. “I don’t know nothing, okay? Now get outta here before you hurt business.”

Joe leaned on the bar and glanced around the room. “Business isn’t exactly booming.”

“We’ve been down a bit, so?” He snapped his towel at the glass and glared at Joe. “Crime goes up, business goes down, okay?”

Joe’s smile faded. “Cut the line.” He leaned in, a snarl in his tone. “You heard about the murder. You probably know who did it. We didn’t come here for ice water, okay?”

“I told ya, I don’t know nothin’.” The bartender’s accent was so thick he was hard to understand.

“Fine.” Joe settled back onto his stool. “We’ll stay all day.”

Clay leaned his forearms on the bar. “We could always get the inspector. He’d love a look around here, don’t you think?”

“Great idea.” Joe started to stand.

“Wait!” The man blinked three times and ran his tongue along his lower lip. He dried a few more glasses, but his hands shook so hard he finally stopped. An exaggerated huff came from him, loud enough that a

few patrons turned and looked. "Listen." He braced himself against the bar, his voice a whisper. "The dead guy was a crack dealer. His boys hang out down the street. At the Top Hat." He lowered his head a little. "Their rivals come from ten, eleven blocks south. They wanted to expand and the guys down the street wouldn't give." He straightened and Clay noticed his lip. It was covered with a fine layer of sweat beads. "I swear that's all I know. I ain't never seen any of 'em in here."

"Okay." Joe didn't miss a beat. "But you know who did it, who was the shooter, right?"

"Not his name, no." He gave a quick shake of his head. "Just where his boys come from."

Clay didn't believe him; he doubted Joe did either. But it was a start. If they were going to interview people down at the Top Hat, they needed to get going. Joe must've thought the same thing. He jotted something down in his notebook. Took the man's name and the bar's phone number.

Outside, they headed down the street. "Amazing," Joe turned to him and grinned, "how much a person can remember when they want a cop to leave 'em alone."

"You did good."

Joe shrugged. "I figured the Top Hat was the place. That's what the guys at briefing said this morning."

Already dusk was falling; shady types lurked near doorways and talked in a cluster as they leaned against the occasional dumpster. Clay squinted at the opposite side of the street. The other pair of detectives were nowhere around.

"Get the feeling all eyes are on us?" Joe raised his eyebrows. He spoke from the side of his mouth, just loud enough for Clay to hear.

"No question." Clay kept his pace brisk. He wasn't worried, just aware. The situation could easily become dangerous.

They reached the Top Hat and spoke to three people. After going round and round with each of them, they came away with a possible

shooter name—the one that matched the name of the man the NYPD detectives already suspected. They also had a tip from a homeless man who refused to give his name. He said the shooter was working with two other guys, and that they were all still in the area.

They left the Top Hat at dusk, though the shadows along the alley made it seem darker. Again the other detectives were not in sight. “Better head back to the squad car.” Joe motioned toward the opposite end of the street.

Clay’s caution grew. Though the establishments where they’d conducted interviews had front entrances on a busier street, the murder occurred in the alley. Any information they might get would have to come from there, but like most big-city alleys, it was intersected by even smaller alleyways. And in the shadowy darkness, as they passed the smaller alleys, Clay kept one hand on his revolver.

“We got some good stuff,” Joe whispered. Voices carried, and neither of them wanted to be heard talking about the interviews they’d done that afternoon.

“Yeah.” Clay looked across the alley again, his eyes darting up and down the length of it. “I was hoping for something—”

A form jumped out from a dark doorway, and Clay felt a hand clamp on to his arm and jerk him off his feet before he had time to pull out his gun. Joe had been grabbed as well.

“Shut up!” A voice hissed at them. The smell of alcohol and old tobacco filled the tight space. “I’ve got a gun! Don’t move.”

Next to him, Joe stopped scuffling and grew still. “We’re police. Don’t do something stupid.”

A different voice laughed at them, and the sound was anything but humorous. Clay blinked and tried to make out their faces. Two Asian-American men, both young and high as kites.

“That’s right, Superman; you’re finished.”

His partner kicked Clay’s leg. “You didn’t think you could come

snoopin' around without an official welcome, did you?" His snort was half laugh, half nervous energy. "We'll lose business because of you jerks."

Business? The pieces came rushing together. They were drug dealers; maybe part of a ring. And now they were wanted in a murder.

In a rush of movement, Joe pulled his gun and pushed the guy who claimed to be armed. "Up against the wall!" His voice was loud, stern. He pulled away enough to get his hand on his revolver, but as he did, both men lunged at him.

Clay pulled his own gun free when a gunshot exploded through the small, cramped space. Joe slumped against the door frame and inched down. His eyes found Clay's and his mouth formed the word, "Help!"

"Joe!" Clay grabbed hold of his friend, stopping him from sliding all the way to the ground.

Both men stepped back and stared at Joe. "Now you did it!" one of them snarled. He pushed his buddy aside and ran down the alley, toward the Top Hat.

"I...I didn't mean it. I didn't shoot him; I swear it." Before the last word was out, the second man turned and followed after his friend.

"Backup!" Clay shouted over his shoulder. Where were the other detectives? *God, let them hear me. Please...* "I need backup. Officer down!"

His hands were shaking so hard he could barely use them. But he kept one set of fingers firmly around Joe's arm, and with the other he yanked his cell phone from his shirt pocket and dialed 911.

"911. What's your emergency?"

Clay gritted his teeth. The other detectives had to be close. *Come on, God...please let Joe be okay.* "Officer down!" He gave his location. "I need emergency backup."

Clay heard screeching tires in the distance and then footsteps, lots of them, running hard and growing closer. NYPD detectives ran up, breathless. "We called for help. Four cars have a bead on the suspects."



Clay grabbed a quick breath. “An ambulance will be here any minute.”

“Clay...” Joe’s voice was fading. His eyes were open, but they looked frozen, in shock. He gasped for breath and stared hard at Clay. “Tell...tell Wanda I...I love her.”

“Keep him upright.” One of the detectives moved in along the other side of Joe and held that arm. “He’s losing a lot of blood.”

Something caught Clay’s eyes and he saw it was a red stain on the door frame, a smeary blood trail caused by Joe’s body sliding down it. Joe’d been shot clear through the abdomen just beneath his flak jacket. He had blood at the corners of his mouth and near his nose, and his eyes were closing. His breathing was labored and slow.

“Joe!” Clay gave him a shake. It was okay; he was going to be okay. He had to be okay. “Hang in there. Wanda wants you to tell her yourself, man. Come on!”

Sirens drew closer, but would the ambulance even matter? Joe was bleeding to death; he had maybe a few minutes by the looks of it. Clay hung his head. “God...please stop the bleeding. Make it stop, God...” His prayer was loud enough for the other detectives to hear, but even as Clay prayed, Joe closed his eyes and his head fell forward.

“No!” Clay tightened his grip on Joe’s shoulder. His heart raced and he wanted to shake something. No, Joe couldn’t die. “God, don’t let him die, please!”

The ambulance sped up and slammed to a stop a few feet away. Clay stayed beside Joe as he was placed on the stretcher, as the men loaded him into the back. He would go with him, of course. Travel in the back to the hospital and stay with him until they found a way to save his life. “Joe, hang on!” Clay shouted the words, in case Joe could hear him.

One of the other detectives grabbed Clay’s shirt and pulled him back from the scene. “You can’t go with him.”

“Why? He needs me there.” He jerked away and took a step toward the ambulance.

“Stop!” It was the other officer, the lead detective.

“I’m going with him!” Clay spun, breathless. The paramedics were closing the door; if he waited another few seconds it would be too late.

“You can’t, Michaels.” The detective’s expression changed. “The medic told me they’re doing CPR; they need all the space they can get.”

“CPR?” Clay felt the ground beneath him turn to liquid.

The detective motioned toward the NYPD squad car, fifty yards away. “Come with us; we’ll get you there just as fast.”

He was in the squad car, the other detectives driving him to the emergency room, when he figured out what to do next. He grabbed his phone and dialed Jamie’s number.

She picked up on the second ring. “Clay...I’m glad you called.”

“Jamie.” He hesitated, not sure how to tell her. “Joe’s been shot. I’m...I’m not sure he’s going to make it.”

Her gasp was sharp, and he could picture her face. Beautiful, terrified. “What happened?”

“We were doing street interviews.” He didn’t want to tell her the other details—not yet. He closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. The detective at the wheel had the siren on, making the best time possible to the hospital. “Pray, Jamie. Please.” He told her what hospital they were headed for. “And call Wanda, okay?”

“Clay...are you all right?”

Her voice was balm for his soul, but he couldn’t think about her that way; not now. He opened his eyes and stared at the city street ahead of them. The hospital wasn’t far away. “Just pray.”

As he hung up he realized something that ripped him apart inside, something that made him turn and lean his head against the car window. If they were doing CPR on Joe Reynolds, then he wasn’t breathing. Which meant there was another reason they hadn’t wanted Clay in the ambulance. Not so much because they had to start CPR.

But because they might have to stop it.

## Drie-en-twintig

Clay en Joe is drie minute van die misdaadtoneel af.

'n Dwelmbaas is in 'n besige steeg in die East Side in die kop geskiet en die spoor is besig om kouer te raak. Die NYPD-speurtak het 'n sterk vermoede dat die verdagte 'n oudgevangene is wat aan die hoof van 'n opposisie dwelmn netwerk staan, maar tot dusver het hulle geen bewyse nie.

Vier van die aspirantspeurders – insluitend Clay en Joe – is aangewys om saam met die NYPD-speurders straatonderhoude te voer. Hulle is aangesê om uit te spreid, en met die ouens wat gereeld by die plaaslike kroë uithang, die plaaslike inwoners en straatverkopers te gesels. Hierdie soort ondersoeke lei byna altyd tot getuies of leidrade wat met die ondersoek sal help.

Clay het nie die vaagste benul hoe hy gefokus gaan bly nie.

“Jy is stil.” Joe sit agter by hom; die twee NYPD-speurders voor in die motor is met hulle eie gesprek besig.

“Ja.” Clay staar deur sy venster.

“Weer Jamie?”

Clay draai na sy vriend. “Is dit so duidelik?” Hy het nie in detail vir Joe vertel nie, net dat iets verkeerd geloop het en dat hy en Jamie nie praat nie. Nie dat Clay nie probeer het nie.

“Jip.” Joe pers sy lippe opmekaar en staar reguit voor hom uit. “Ek dink ons lyk ewe stert tussen die bene.”

“Ek dink Wanda sal dinge anders begin sien.” Clay onderdruk sy eie seer en dink aan sy vriend. Joe het Wanda die laaste paar dae ook nie gesien nie. Nie sedert hy in trane uitgebars het toe hy Wanda se klein seuntjie gesien het nie. Die outjie is die ewebeeld van die kind wat hulle verloor het.

“Sy weet nie wat om te sê nie; ek ook nie. Ek het vir haar gesê ek is jammer, maar dis nie genoeg nie. Dis asof sy my nie glo nie.”

Clay wag. Hulle is amper by die stegie waar die moord plaasgevind het. “Ek sê nog steeds dat sy tot ander insigte gaan kom.” Hy kyk na sy vriend. “Julle hoort bymekaar.”

“Net soos jy en Jamie.” Joe het nog altyd 'n droë humorsin gehad en laat nooit 'n kans verbygaan om iets pittigs kwyd te raak nie. Maar nou is sy stem stil, amper teer. “Ek het jou gesien nadat jy by haar was, man. Jy het pens en pootjies vir die vrou geval. Jy kan dalk vir 'n paar dae nie met haar praat nie, maar dit gaan niks verander nie. Hierdie soort gevoel gaan nie weg nie.”

Clay vernou sy oë. Sy hele wese hunker na Jamie, maar daar is niks wat hy daaraan kan doen nie. Sedert daardie aaklige oggend bel hy haar twee maal 'n dag. Dis nog net 'n paar dae voor hy weggaan, en hulle het nie eens die geleentheid gehad om totsiens te sê nie. Was dit die Here se plan? Dat hulle mekaar moes ontmoet en iets voel wat hulle nog nooit by iemand anders ervaar het nie, net om uit te vind dat alles tevergeefs was?

Die ergste was om met Eric te praat.

Clay het hom daardie Maandagaand gebel, die dag toe hy uitgevind het. Eric het opgeruimd geantwoord. Dalk te opgeruimd. “En toe, kleinboet, hoe gaan dit in New York?”

“Dit het al beter gegaan.” ’n Ongemaklike stilte het gevolg en Clay het gewee; met ’n broederlike soort sesde sintuig het hy gewee. Eric het dit sedert hulle laaste oproep gevrees, die moontlikheid dat Clay se Jamie inderdaad Jamie Bryan was.

“Ja, wel, jy’s amper klaar met opleiding.” Eric het ongemaklik keel skoongemaak. “Hei ... Clay ... Wat’s die meisie se naam wat jy ontmoet het? Die een van die veerboot. Jy weet, van Staten Island?”

“Hoekom het jy my nie die eerste keer gevra toe ek gebel het nie?” Clay het die bitterheid uit sy stem probeer hou. Dit was nie Eric se skuld nie. ’n Hartseer laggie het oor sy lippe ontsnap. “Jy het dit seker geraai, nè?”

“Wat is haar naam, Clay?” het Eric angstig gevra.

“Jamie Bryan.” Clay het na die plafon van sy hotelkamer gestaar. “Dis sy, nè? Die vrou by wie jy gebly het.”

Natuurlik was dit.

Eric was net so geskok oor die vreemde toeval soos Clay en Jamie. Wat was die waarskynlikheid dat Clay New York toe gaan en op die vrou verlief raak wat drie maande lank die rol van Eric se vrou gespeel het?

Voordat hulle afgelui het, het Eric Clay probeer oortuig dat dit nie saak maak nie; die ongemak ten spyte, hulle sou dit maak werk om Jamie Bryan vir Thanksgiving by hulle te hê. Maar Clay kon die onsekerheid in sy broer se stem hoor. Eric en Jamie was ewe teësinnig om mekaar weer te sien.

Clay het weer verloor; vir ’n tweede keer het hy teen sy broer verloor. Hierdie keer is die slag soveel swaarder. Op hoërskool het hy die kans gehad om Laura uit te vra lank voor Eric op die toneel verskyn het. Maar hy was nie seker nie; sy voete was toe nog nie heeltemal onder hom uitgeslaan nie. Eintlik was dit eers nadat Eric met Laura begin uitgaan het dat Clay se belangstelling toegeneem het.

Toe dit ná 11 September geblyk het dat Eric dood was, was Clay oortuig dat die Here ’n plan vir hom en Laura gehad het. Maar selfs in daardie tyd was sy gevoelens vir haar meer dié van broederlike liefde en omgee.

Ja, hy was aangetrokke tot Laura.

Maar Jamie Bryan het sy wêreld omgekeer.

Die polisiemotor hou buite die stegie stil, en die speurder agter die stuur skakel die enjin af. “Dis vieruur.” Hy kyk na die ander mans in die motor. “Ons het ’n uur voor dit donker is, en dis al wat ons nodig het. Julle weet wat om te doen.” Hy grinnik, sy oë hard en gefokus. “Gaan in, kry die inligting en kom uit. Die mense weet wat gebeur het.” Hy klap liggies op sy holster. “Wees op julle hoede, veral as dit donker word. Die moordenaar loop los. As dit die ou is wat ons vermoed, is sy maatjies steeds in die omgewing. Dis geen geheim dat hulle besig is om meer as banksakkies dagga te verpak nie.” Hy

gee hulle 'n laaste kyk en knik na sy kollega op die passasiersitplek. “Ons vat die oorkant van die straat. Bly in pare.”

Hulle klim uit en die speurder en sy vriend steek die straat oor. Al vier mans is in uniform, gewapen en het penne en notaboekies by hulle. Joe draai na Clay en lig sy wenkbrou. “Ek dink dis tyd om vir 'n rukkie van die vroumense te vergeet.”

Clay val langs hom in. “Ek het nogal 'n idee ons sal hier moet wakker wees.”

Die eerste plek is 'n bedenklike ontkleekklub sonder enige vensters – tipies agterstraat. Al het die skietery aan die onderpunt van die steeg plaasgevind, wil hulle met almal praat wat hulle binne 'n radius van honderd meter teëkom. Clay stoot die deur oop en dit neem 'n paar sekondes voordat sy oë die donker gewoond is. Hulle word onmiddellik deur 'n dik rookwolk begroet.

Joe pomp hom in die ribbes. “Kokkerotwêreld.” Hy praat sag. “'n Spul goggas wat net in die donker oorleef.”

“Ek hoor jou.” Clay kan al beter sien, maar nie veel nie. Die blou rook hang swaar in die lug en die musiek weerklink polsend deur die kroeg. Neonligte tol en draai oor 'n dofverligte verhoog waar iemand dans. Clay kyk nie; hy doen dit nooit nie. Wanneer sy werk hom na hierdie soort plekke bring, herinner hy homself aan teksverse wat handel oor die boosheid wat in die duisternis woon en dat die duisternis nie die lig kan verduur nie.

Toe hy 'n kind was, het Clay eendag op sy pa se *Playboy* versameling afgekom. Selfs op daardie ouderdom het iets in Clay se gees daarteen gerebelleer. Hy het die naarheid in hom voel opstoot. Het sy pa na kaal vroue gekyk? Na ander vroue as sy ma?

Namate hy ouer geword het, het sy geloof die gevoelens versterk wat hy as kind gehad het. Vroue wat in só 'n plek dans, interesseer hom glad nie. Hulle maak hom hartseer, en hy kry hulle jammer oor wat in die eerste plek moes gebeur het dat hulle hier uitgekome het.

Die kroegman kyk hulle aan. Hy is bles en dra een oorring en 'n styfpassende T-hemp. Hy brom in hulle rigting. “Kan ek julle help?”

Joe doen die praatwerk. “Jy weet seker van die moord.” Hy loop na die kroegtoonbank toe. “Die een onder in die straat.”

Die man tel 'n nat glas en vadoek op en begin afdroog. Hy praat en kyk Joe reguit in die oë. “Jammer, Meneer.” Sy stem is afgemete. “Ek weet nie waarvan jy praat nie.”

Clay versit sy gewig en bestudeer die man. Hy weet iets, dis verseker. Maar nes hulle verwag het, is hy nie bereid om te praat nie. Hierdie mense maak nie eenvoudig oop en verskaf inligting aan speurders nie. Hulle moet oorreed word.

Joe het 'n reputasie as uitstekende oorreder.

“Reg.” Hy gaan sit en tik op die stoel langs hom.

Clay gaan sit en kyk na die paar klante wat by skemertafels sit. Joe sal die vroeë vra; hy sal bystaan. “Twee glase water.”

Die kroegman gee hom 'n kyk. Hy skink die water en stoot die glase oor die

toonbank. “Ek weet niks nie, oukei?” Sal julle asseblief nou julle ry kry voordat my plek leegloop.”

Joe leun op die toonbank en kyk om hom rond. “Lyk nie asof jou plek juis oorloop nie.”

“Wat daarvan as ons ’n bietjie stiller is.” Hy gee sy vadoek ’n pluk en gluur na Joe. “Misdaad is nie goed vir besigheid nie, oukei?”

Joe se glimlag vervaag. “Kom ons praat reguit.” Hy leun vooroor, sy stem bytend. “Jy weet van die moord. Jy weet tien teen een wie dit gedoen het. Ons het nie vir ’n glas koue water hiernatoe gekom nie.”

“Ek’t julle gesê, ek weet niks nie.” Die kroegman praat met ’n swaar aksent.

“Nou goed.” Joe sak terug op sy stoel “Dan kuier ons heelaand.”

Clay leun met sy voorarms op die toonbank. “Ons kan altyd die inspekteur laat inkom. Ek’s seker hy sal bitter graag hier kom rondkyk, Joe.”

“Goeie idee.” Joe begin opstaan.

“Wag!” Die man knipper sy oë en lek oor sy onderlip. Hy droog nog ’n paar glase af, maar sy hande bewe so erg dat hy ophou. Hy maak ’n ergerlike geluid, hard genoeg om ’n paar van die klante te laat omkyk. “Luister.” Hy leun swaar op die toonbank en praat in ’n fluisterstem. “Die ou wat geskiet is, was ’n dwelmbaas. Sy ouens se kuierplek is hier onder by die Top Hat.” Hy laat sak sy kop effens. “Hulle opposisie kom van tien, elf blokke suid. Hulle wou uitbrei en die local ouens wou nie kopgee nie.” Hy kom orent en Clay merk dat ’n fyn lagie sweet op sy voorkop uitgeslaan het. “Ek sweer dis al wat ek weet. Ek het niemand van hulle al hier by my gesien nie.”

“Oukei.” Joe bly onverstoord. “Maar jy weet wie dit gedoen het, wie die ou geskiet het, nè?”

“Nie sy naam nie, nee.” Hy skud sy kop vinnig. “Net waar sy ouens vandaan kom.”

Clay glo hom nie; Joe waarskynlik ook nie. Maar dis ’n begin. As hulle met die mense in die Top Hat wil gaan praat, moet hulle aan die beweeg kom. Joe moes dit ook gedink het. Hy krabbel iets in sy notaboek. Vra die man se naam en die kroeg se telefoonnommer.

Buitekant kry hulle koers straataf. “Dis ongelooflik hoeveel iemand kan onthou wanneer hulle van ’n polisieman wil ontslae raak,” kom dit droog van Joe.

“Jy het goed gedoen.”

Joe haal sy skouers op. “Ek’t nogal gedink die Top Hat is die plek. Dis wat die ouens by vanoggend se inligtingsessie gesê het.”

Dis besig om skemer te word; donker figure sit verskuil naby deure en praat in groepies op sypaadjies. Clay skreef sy oë na die oorkant van die straat. Daar is geen teken van die ander twee speurders nie.

“Kry jy ook die gevoel dat almal na ons kyk?” Joe lig sy wenkbroue. Hy praat uit die hoek van sy mond sodat net Clay kan hoor.

“Beslis.” Clay loop teen ’n flink pas. Hy is nie bang nie, net op sy hoede. Die situasie kan maklik gevaarlik raak.

By die Top Hat aangekom, praat hulle met drie mense. Nadat hulle die ouens deeglik ondervra het, het hulle 'n moontlike naam – dié van die man wat reeds deur die NYPD verdink word. Hulle kry ook 'n wenk van 'n hawelose man wat nie sy naam vir hulle wil gee nie. Hy sê dat die moordenaar saam met twee ander mans werk, en dat hulle steeds in die area is.

Dis al sterk skemer toe hulle by die Top Hat loop, en dis onheilspellend donker in die steeg. Daar is steeds nie 'n teken van die ander speurders nie. “Ek dink ons moet teruggaan kar toe.” Joe wys in die rigting waar hulle parkeer het.

Clay se waaksaamheid neem toe. Albei kroeë waar hulle was, het hoofingange wat op 'n besiger straat uitloop, maar die moord het hier in die steeg plaasgevind. Enige moontlike inligting sal hier bekom word, maar nes by die meeste ander stegies, is daar kleiner stegies wat uit hierdie een loop. Terwyl hulle in die skaduagtige donker verby die kleiner stegies loop, bly Clay se een hand op sy rewolwer.

“Ons het nie sleg gevaar nie,” fluister Joe. Stemme dra en hulle wil nie hê mense moet hoor dat hulle oor die middag se ondervragings praat nie.

“Ja.” Clay se oë flits weer na die oorkant van die straat. “Ek het vir iets gehoop wat ...”

'n Figuur spring vanuit 'n donker deuropening en Clay word aan die arm van balans af geruk voordat hy sy wapen kan uitpluk. Iemand anders het Joe ook bygedam.

“Hou julle bekke!” 'n Stem sis in hulle ore. Die reuk van alkohol en ou tabak hang versmorend in die lug. “Ek het 'n geweer. Moenie beweeg nie.”

Langs hom hou Joe op baklei. “Ons is polisie. Moenie iets doms doen nie.”

'n Tweede stem lag vir hulle, maar dis sonder enige humor. Clay knip sy oë en probeer hulle gesigte uitmaak. Twee Oosterse mans, jonk en duidelik onder die invloed van die een of ander dwelm.

“Dis reg, Superman; dis klaar met jou.”

Sy vriend skop Clay in die been. “Julle het seker nie gedink julle kan sonder 'n amptelike verwelkoming hier kom rondsuffel nie.” Hy gee 'n senuweeagtige snorklaggie. “Julle gaan maak dat ons besigheid verloor.”

Besigheid? Die stukkies val in mekaar. Hulle is dwelmsmouse; moontlik deel van 'n netwerk. En nou word hulle in verband met 'n moord gesoek.

Die volgende oomblik pluk Joe sy rewolwer uit en stamp die man wat beweer dat hy gewapen is, weg van hom. “Teen die muur!” Sy stem is hard, onverbiddelik. Hy staan terug om sy wapen op hulle te rig, maar albei mans is onmiddellik op hom.

Clay pluk sy eie rewolwer uit toe 'n skoot in die klein, beknopte ruimte knal. Joe knak vooroor en sak teen die deurkosyn af. Sy oë ontmoet Clay s'n en sy mond vorm die woord: “Help!”

“Joe!” Clay gryp sy vriend en keer dat hy heeltemal op die vloer neersyg.

Albei mans steier terug en staar na Joe. “Kyk wat het jy gedoen!” kap die een. Hy stamp sy vriend uit die pad en begin in die rigting van die Top Hat

hardloop.

“Ek ... ek’t dit nie bedoel nie. Ek’t daai man nie geskiet nie; ek sweer.” Hy het reeds omgedraai en begin hardloop.

“Bystand!” roep Clay oor sy skouer. Waar is die ander speurders? *Here, laat hulle kom. Asseblief...* “Ek benodig bystand. Polisieman geskiet!”

Sy hande bewes so erg dat hy hulle amper nie kan gebruik nie. Maar hy hou een stel vingers ferm om Joe se arm en met die ander gryp hy sy selfoon uit sy hemsak en bel 911.

“911. Wat is jou situasie?”

Clay byt op sy tande. Die ander speurders moet naby wees. *Asseblief, Here ... laat Joe oukei wees.* Hy verskaf sy ligging. “Ek het bystand nodig.”

In die verte kan Clay skreeuende bande hoor en dan voetstappe, baie van hulle wat vinnig naderkom. Die NYPD-speurders kom uitasem aangehardloop. “Ons het hulp ontbied. Vier motors is op die verdagtes se spoor.” Clay skep vinnig asem. “’n Ambulans gaan nou hier wees.”

“Clay ... ” Joe se stem is swak. Sy oë is oop, maar stokstyf van skok. Hy hyg na asem en kyk stip na Clay. “Sê ... sê vir Wanda ... ek’s lief vir haar.”

“Hou hom regop.” Een van die speurders kom hurk aan Joe se ander kant en hou daardie arm vas. “Hy is besig om baie bloed te verloor.”

Clay se oë word deur ’n rooi vlek op die deurkosyn gevang, ’n smerige bloedspoor wat deur Joe se liggaam gelaat is. Joe is net onder sy koeëlvaste baadjie deur die onderlyf geskiet. Daar is bloed in sy mondhoeke en naby sy neus, en sy oë is besig om toe te gaan. Sy asemhaling is moeisam en stadig.

“Joe!” Clay skud hom liggies. Dis oukei; hy gaan oukei wees. Hy moet oukei wees. “Hou uit. Wanda wil hê jy moet dit self vir haar sê, man. Joe, luister na my!”

Die loeiende sirenes is nou naby, maar Clay weet nie of die ambulans ’n verskil sal maak nie. Joe is besig om hom dood te bloei; hy het moontlik nog net ’n paar minute oor. Clay laat hang sy kop. “Here ... keer die bloeding, asseblief. Laat dit ophou, Here ... ” Sy gebed is net hard genoeg dat die ander speurders dit kan hoor, maar Clay is nog besig om te bid, toe Joe se oë toegaan en sy kop vorentoe val.

“Nee!” Clay se greep verstyf op Joe se skouer. Sy hart klop gejaagd en hy wil iets slaan. Nee, Joe kan nie doodgaan nie. “Here, moenie dat hy doodgaan nie, asseblief!”

Toe is die ambulans by hulle. Clay bly langs Joe terwyl hy op die draagbaar getel word en die mans hom in die ambulans laai. Hy sal vanselfsprekend saamry hospitaal toe en by hom bly totdat hulle hom buite gevaar het. “Joe, vasbyt!” Clay praat in ’n harde stem vir ingeval Joe hom kan hoor.

Een van die ander speurders kry hom aan die arm terug. “Jy kan nie saamgaan nie.”

“Hoekom nie? Hy het my nodig.” Hy ruk los en mik na die ambulans.

“Stop!” Dis die ander polisiebeampte, die speurder in bevel.

“Ek gaan saam met hom!” Clay is uitasem. Die paramedici is besig om die



deur toe te maak; as hy nie nou inklim nie, is dit te laat.

“Jy kan nie, Michaels.” Die speurder se uitdrukking verander. “Hulle gaan kunsmatige asemhaling toepas; hulle het soveel moontlik spasie nodig.”

“Kunsmatige asemhaling?” Clay voel hoe die grond onder hom meegee.

Die speurder beduie na die polisiemotor ’n entjie daarvandaan. “Ry saam met ons; jy gaan net so vinnig daar wees.”

In die motor op pad hospitaal toe besef hy wat hy volgende moet doen. Hy haal sy selfoon uit en skakel Jamie se nommer.

Sy tel na die tweede lui op. “Clay ... ek’s so bly jy bel.”

“Jamie.” Hy aarsel, nie mooi seker wat hy moet sê nie. “Joe is geskiet. Ek’s ... ek’s nie seker of hy dit gaan maak nie.”

Sy snak skerp na asem en hy kan haar gesig voor hom sien. Beeldskoon, beangs. “Wat het gebeur?”

“Ons was met ondervragings besig.” Hy wil nie nou reeds al die besonderhede met haar deel nie – nog nie. Hy maak sy oë toe en knyp sy neusbrug vas. Die speurder agter die stuur het die sirene aangeskakel en hulle vorder goed. “Bid, Jamie. Asseblief.” Hy gee die naam van die hospitaal. “En bel vir Wanda, sal jy?”

“Clay ... is jy oukei?”

Haar stem is soos balsem vir sy siel, maar hy kan nie so aan haar dink nie; nie nou nie. Hy maak sy oë oop en kyk na die pad voor hulle. Dis nie meer ver tot by die hospitaal nie. “Bid net.”

Toe hy aflui, word hy deur ’n gedagte getref wat deur sy binneste skeur, iets wat hom laat wegdraai en sy kop teen die motorruit laat sak. As hulle kunsmatige asemhaling op Joe Reynolds toepas, beteken dit dat hy nie asemhaal nie. Wat beteken dat daar nog ’n rede is waarom hulle Clay nie in die ambulans wil hê nie. Nie soseer omdat hulle daarmee moet begin nie.

Maar omdat hulle dalk sal moet ophou.

## Chapter TWENTY-FOUR

It took Jamie twenty minutes to board the ferry for Manhattan.

Her first call had been to Wanda, and as she'd expected, her friend was terrified, too scared to speak. She was able to say only that she was on her way to the hospital and that she wanted Jamie to meet her there.

Next she called a neighbor, who was more than willing to take Sierra for the evening. Before she did that, she told Sierra that Clay's friend had been hurt and she needed to be with him. Sierra didn't say much, but her eyes shone. A strange mixture of fear and hope.

Jamie thought she knew why.

She hadn't seen or spoken about Clay in days, and Sierra wasn't happy about the fact. Now, though, if Jamie was going to the hospital to meet him—even for a sad reason—then maybe she would get to see Clay again.

Even so, they didn't talk about Clay. Every second counted, and she wanted to be at the hospital when Wanda arrived. She took time to do just one thing before she left. She went to her bedroom dresser, where she kept Jake's Bible, and she lifted her left hand.

She'd always believed she would know. That when it was time for her wedding ring to come off, she wouldn't have any doubts. She studied the ring. Jake, her marriage to him, their days of loving and laughing and making a life together, would always be a part of her. But the ring...

It was time.

She worked it off her finger, held it in her hand a moment, then opened the lid on a small blown-glass box. With careful fingers, she set her wedding ring inside the box, and shut the lid.

Her hand seemed empty. She ran her thumb over the bare spot, the pale indented circle at the base of her finger. It would bear for a very long time the proof that Jake's ring had been there. Much as her heart would forever bear proof of Jake himself.

She took a quick step back, then left the room. She ran Sierra over to the neighbor's, then headed toward the ferry. The news was still working its way through her, convincing her that this latest, terrible thing really had happened. That Joe had been shot and critically wounded on the streets of Manhattan.

Jamie parked and made her way to the line for the ferry. Once aboard, she crossed to the opposite side, so she'd be first off when the boat docked. It was dark, the sky providing a cloud cover that kept temperatures from dropping too much. She found a place outside, near the railing, and stared at the skyline.

*God...let him live. Guide the doctors and be with Wanda. Please, Father.*

Peace wrapped its arms around her and she leaned into it.

Tragedy used to scare her to death. The news of it almost as much as the event itself. That was something else the terrorist attacks had taught her—how to handle bad news. Nothing could be as terrible as coming into the health club lobby that awful Tuesday morning and seeing the World Trade Center in flames on television.

She was anxious, lifting her voice to God every few minutes on Joe's behalf. But she was calm at the core, convinced that survival was possible—even in the face of great loss. And so it wasn't only thoughts of Joe that filled her mind as the boat sliced through the harbor. It was thoughts of Clay and Jake and Sierra and life.

And of her epiphany on the beach.

It wasn't that she'd avoided life all this time. She hadn't chosen death over life, not at first. Working at St. Paul's had been her way of choosing to live. It was that or crawl into bed and never get up again.

But after two years of volunteering, after hearing the stories of loss and praying with grieving relatives and letting strangers cry on her shoulder, Jamie had grown. She no longer needed a reason to get out of bed in the morning. God gave her that just by sending the morning, by giving

her another day with Him.

Whether she spent that day with Sierra or the people at St. Paul's, she no longer felt like one of the walking dead, the empty-eyed grievers who still colored the Manhattan landscape. Rather she was excited about life, about what God wanted to do with her and through her as long as she drew breath. It only made sense that she'd outgrown her time at Ground Zero. She could find purpose at St. Paul's, but she couldn't move on there.

She looked at the sky and saw Jake's image, his face smiling at her, giving her that knowing look. The one that told her he knew what she needed to do, and she knew it too. Now all she had to do was make the decision.

"Choose life, right, Jake?" Tears blurred her eyes. "Even with someone new. That's what you want me to do, isn't it?"

His eyes were as clear as if he were standing in front of her, clear and blue and filled with a love that she hadn't understood when he was alive. "Jake..."

The image held for a moment longer. Then it faded and blurred and became night sky. Yes, that's exactly what he would want her to do. Him and God Almighty.

*See, I set before you now life and prosperity, death and destruction... Choose life!*

That was why God brought Clay into her life in the first place. That she might be moved forward in the healing process, past the point of St. Paul's and toward the possibility of new life.

New love.

Just the thought of Clay made her breath catch in her throat. As desperate as the situation was, she felt a little bit like Sierra. Frightened and filled with concern, but with eyes that shone with hope. Because in a very little while she would see Clay again. And at some point, she'd tell him about her day, how she'd figured things out on a cold lonely beach, and how wrong she'd been before.

How much she needed him.

But what about Joe? What if he didn't make it? Clay had sounded desperately worried. She wanted to be with Clay, to pray with him and help him believe everything would work out. She pressed into the railing, urging the boat to move faster.

They needed to sit by Joe and coax him to hold on, because with God Almighty calling the shots, life—with all its painful turns and gut-wrenching losses—still had tremendous hope even in the simplicity of a sunrise.

Jamie had made the choice to choose life. Now, where Joe was concerned, she would pray for it.

The boat pulled up to the dock, and Jamie had a cab in record time. She was still praying for Joe when they arrived at the hospital and she paid the driver. Now that she'd come this far, she couldn't wait to find Clay, and she ran into the lobby and down the hall toward the emergency room.

Clay was the first person she saw.

He had his back to her, his arms crossed, head hung. He wore his uniform, and next to him sat two detectives, talking to a third uniformed officer with a notepad. Their conversation was hushed, relegated to the far corner of the waiting room.

Jamie made her way closer, and when she was halfway there, Clay turned. His eyes found hers, and her heart skipped. How could she have considered leaving this man, losing him, just because his brother was Eric Michaels? The entire situation seemed ludicrous now. After all, if Eric made her uncomfortable, she could keep her distance from him.

But she couldn't keep her distance from Clay. Not a minute longer.

In as much time as it took him to look at her she understood that, understood it to the core of her being. He came to her, and they met in the middle, falling into an embrace that was seeped in sorrow and relief. Sorrow over Joe; relief that despite the strange circumstances, they'd found their way back together.

Clay held her for a long time, his arms around her waist, hers around his neck. Being with him like this was better than she could've dreamed. She closed her eyes and savored it. Life. Bubbling through her and filling her with a sort of joy that left her speechless. *God...I don't want him to ever let go. Please, God.*

She opened her eyes. The officers had looked away. The waiting room offered little privacy, but at least the others weren't watching. She pressed her face against Clay's, still relishing the feel of his arms around her waist. "How is he?"

"Alive." Clay drew back. He searched her eyes. "They're operating, but it doesn't look good. The bullet messed up his insides pretty good." His cheeks were red and blotchy, his expression pained. "They told us to expect the worst."

Jamie felt her heart sink to her ankles. "No..." She shook her head and tightened her grip on Clay's arms. "We can't give up."

"I know." Determination filled his eyes. "I've been praying."

"Me too." She paused. This wasn't the time, really. But she had to tell him, had to share what had happened to her that day. "Clay, there's something I want you to know."

Concern filled his face. Clearly he expected her to say that though she had come, it was only as a show of support because of Joe. Not because she'd changed her mind about Clay or the situation with Eric.

"Relax. It's a good thing."

He studied her, his brow knit together. "Good?"

"Yes." She felt the corners of her mouth lift some. She eased her thumb along the fine lines in his forehead. "Sierra and I would like to spend Thanksgiving with you and your family." Even with the sadness and pain in her heart because of Joe, she felt her eyes dance a little. "If we're still welcome, that is."

"What about Eric?" He moved his hands up to her shoulders and studied her. As if she might vanish if he didn't hold on to her. "You're

okay with him? Dinner's at his house."

"God showed me something today." She looped her hands around the back of his neck. "I lost Jake on September 11; he was never alive after that." A wave of sorrow came over her, but she rode it out. "Every memory I have from that point on wasn't with Jake; it was with Eric. A stranger who came to our house to learn how to be the kind of father and family man God wanted him to be."

Clay nodded, studying her, making sure she believed the words she was saying. "You mean it?"

"Yes." She hugged him for a long while before pulling back and finding his eyes. "Eric was never Jake, and if he wasn't Jake, then what's the problem? He's just a nice guy who looks a lot like my husband."

For a moment, Clay's mouth hung open. Then he shook his head. "I prayed for this, Jamie. That you'd understand about Eric. But when you didn't take my calls, I—"

"Shhh." She held her finger up to his lips. "I understand." They released their hold on each other, and she led him to a pair of seats a few yards away from the other officers. When they sat down, she wove her fingers between his. "We need another miracle tonight. Let's pray for Joe."

Clay held her eyes a moment, then bowed his head and began to pray. He begged God for the same things Jamie had been asking for. That Joe would live; that he would have no lasting effects from the terrible gunshot wound.

When the prayer was over, they spotted Wanda. She was just entering the emergency room, frantic fear scrawled across her face. Right away she saw them and she started to cry. "Jamie!"

She stood and met her friend, holding her even when her legs buckled. Clay was on his feet, helping ease Wanda into a chair, but she was unstable. Dizzy from the shock. When she was seated between them, she leaned forward, clearly trying to fight what must've been a consuming panic. "How is he? Can I see him?"

Clay gave her the update, and when he got to the part about his chances, Wanda broke down, weeping, clinging to both of them.

"I...I waited too long!" She could barely breathe for the sobs. "I can't...lose him now." She looked at Jamie, her expression frozen in regret. "I love him, Jamie. I love him."

They stayed that way most of the night, long after the other detectives reported that the suspects had been arrested, along with four other men—all part of the drug ring responsible for the murder in the alley, as well as a host of other unsolved crimes. Once they'd delivered that news, the other detectives said their good-byes and their condolences.

And still the three of them stayed, Jamie and Clay on either side of Wanda, taking turns holding her while she cried, comforting her and listening to her talk about Joe and how much she'd missed him and how come she couldn't have told him so sooner.

"Pride, that's what it was." She came up with this conclusion sometime around four in the morning. "I would've called him back the day he left if it weren't for my cursed pride."

Jamie shot a look at Clay as relief made its way through her. *Thank You, God...that it's not ten years from now and me saying those words about Clay.*

The night wore on, and twice doctors reported no change. Joe was still in critical condition, still on life support, his body trying to adjust to the massive blood loss and internal injuries. Jamie was exhausted, but they had to hold on. News could come at any minute.

The group grew quiet, lost in their own prayers and thoughts. Sometime around seven that morning, Clay was pacing along the window area, and Wanda had her face in her hands when a doctor entered the waiting room.

He was grinning.

All three of them were on their feet, meeting the doctor. Only Clay could find the words to speak. "How is he?"



"I'm amazed, really. A half hour ago his vital signs had a sudden improvement. We took him off life support, and he's doing well." The doctor gave a shake of his head. "*Very well. Almost as if someone breathed life into him.*"

"Oh my..." Wanda lifted her fingers slowly to her mouth. Her eyes found Clay's and then Jamie's. "For the past hour I changed my prayer. I told God if he'd let Joe live, I'd spend the rest of my days by that man's side, following the Lord together, the way we should have from the beginning."

Chills ran down Jamie's arms.

The doctor gave Wanda a knowing nod. "I've seen this kind of thing too often to doubt it. God still works miracles today; I'm convinced." He paused. "You've been here all night. You can come in and see him if you'd like. He's trying to come around."

"Oh, thank God!" Wanda hugged the doctor. "He's giving me one more chance!"

Jamie rubbed her arms to ward off another series of chills. How was it possible? Two hours ago Joe barely clung to life, and now he was breathing on his own, waking up? The power of God at work in their presence was enough to drop her to her knees.

Instead she took Clay's hand and the three of them followed the doctor to Joe's room. He was hooked to half a dozen machines, and he had tubes running into his nose and arms. But otherwise he looked well. His midsection was bandaged and a light sheet covered him to his waist.

Wanda looked at the doctor. "Can I...can I touch him?"

Joe moved his lips and made a weak attempt at clearing his throat. "Doc..." His voice was scratchy. "That's my Wanda." He struggled, wincing from the pain. "You better...tell her yes."

"Joe!" She framed his face with her hands and kissed him square on the mouth. "I'm sorry! It wasn't all your fault, it was mine." She was crying again, crying and smiling and holding on to Joe the same way Jamie

had hung on to Clay hours earlier. Her words spilled out almost too fast to understand. “I should’ve gone after you when Jimmy died, and instead I made a stupid mistake and lost you. I lost you, but it was my pride.” She took a quick breath. “My pride, I tell you. It kept me from calling when I should’ve, and now it almost kept me from telling you the most important thing, because Joe Reynolds, I have pride something fierce! But guess what?”

He blinked and his eyes opened just enough to see her. “You won... the speed-talking award?”

She stopped and sat a bit straighter. Then her eyes lit up, and she looked at Jamie and Clay. “He’s gonna be fine! If he’s got his humor, he’s gonna be just fine.”

The slits in Joe’s eyes grew wider. He looked around the room, wincing again as he shifted himself higher on his pillow. “Michaels?”

“I’m here.” Clay took a step forward.

“Tell me they got those punks.” His words were slow, but he was coming back a little more every few minutes.

Clay smiled and Jamie moved in beside him. “Got ’em good, buddy. Real good.”

“Attempted murder?” He managed a weak smile.

Jamie understood. *Attempted* murder, because Joe had every intention of surviving the shooting. She felt something warm work its way through her, and she knew what it was. Blessed assurance. The certainty that God had indeed worked not just one miracle in their midst by bringing her to the understanding that she could see Clay again. But He’d worked the miracle of Joe’s life as well.

Clay took another step closer and put his hand on Joe’s knee. “More than that.” He looked at Jamie. “The guys were wanted for a bunch of drug deals and one other murder. They were part of a ring.”

“Scary.” Jamie felt the blood leave her face.

“Yeah.” Clay gave her a look that told her he’d known this

information all night, but hadn't wanted to share it until now.

Jamie looked at the floor near her feet, too shocked to speak. Fear tap-danced around Jamie but didn't touch her. It could have been Clay just as easily. She met his eyes and looped her arm through his. "I'm so glad they caught them."

Joe gave a slow nod and looked at Jamie. He shifted his gaze to Clay. "What else they get 'em for?"

"Besides attempted murder?" Clay grinned at his friend. "Homicide in the alley killing and a number of drug charges."

Joe lifted his head a few inches off the pillow. "They were the killers?"

"Not sure which one was the shooter, but the police think one of 'em is their guy."

"Okay, then ask the doc...when I can leave." His voice was still scratchy, his words still slow. He smiled at Wanda. "That news calls for a party."

"No parties." Wanda kissed him on the cheek. The mood changed as she grew quiet, searching his eyes. "You have to get better, Joe. And when you go back to L.A. you have to take me and the kids with you." Her voice was softer, not the hysterical weeping or giddy excitement from earlier, but a deep warmth that filled the room. "I love you, Joe Reynolds. God gave me the chance to tell you. This time I'm not going to miss it."

Clay shifted and pulled Jamie into another embrace. Not as desperate as the one they'd shared when she first arrived at the hospital, but one of joy and contentment.

He whispered close to her ear. "I think we should leave them alone."

"Me too." Jamie stifled a giggle and let herself get lost in Clay's eyes. "Besides, you have a call to make."

"I do?" He nuzzled his nose against hers.

"Yes." Now that Joe was doing better, she allowed herself to be lost in the feelings he stirred in her. She wanted to kiss him, wanted it as much

as she wanted her next breath. But they had other details to take care of first.

“Okay, Miss Jamie.” He held her closer, a lazy smile hanging on his lips, his eyes filled with desire. “Who do I have to call?”

“Your brother, so you can tell him the news. Sierra and I are coming for Thanksgiving.”

## Vier-en-twintig

Dit neem Jamie twintig minute voordat sy op die veerboot is.

Haar eerste oproep was na Wanda en soos sy verwag het, was haar vriendin angsbevange en amper te bang om te praat. Sy kon net uitkry dat sy hospitaal toe gaan en dat Jamie haar asseblief daar moet kry.

Daarna het sy die buurvrou gebel, wat meer as gewillig was om die aand na Sierra te kyk. Voordat sy die oproep gemaak het, het sy vir Sierra gesê dat Clay se vriend seergekry het en dat sy na hom toe moes gaan. Sierra het nie veel gesê nie, maar haar oë was blink. 'n Vreemde kombinasie van vrees en hoop.

Jamie dink sy weet waarom.

Sy het dae laas oor Clay gepraat, en Sierra is nie gelukkig daaroor nie. Maar as Jamie hom nou by die hospitaal moet kry – selfs vir 'n hartseer rede – beteken dit dat sy Clay dalk weer gaan sien.

Hulle het egter nie oor Clay gepraat nie. Elke sekonde tel en sy wil by die hospitaal wees wanneer Wanda daar opdaag. Sy het net een oomblik afgeknyp voordat sy gery het. Sy het na die kas toe gegaan waar sy Jake se Bybel hou, en na haar linkerhand gekyk.

Sy het altyd geglo sy sou weet. Dat wanneer dit tyd was om haar trouing af te haal, sy geen twyfel sou hê nie. Jake, haar huwelik met hom, hulle lewe saam, sal altyd deel van haar wees. Maar die ring ...

Dis tyd.

Sy het dit afgehaal, vir 'n oomblik in haar hand gehou en toe 'n klein glashouertjie oopgemaak. Sy het haar trouing met versigtigheid daarin geplaas en die dekseltjie toegemaak.

Haar hand het kaal gevoel. Sy het aan die bleek merkie onder aan haar vinger geraak. Dit sal nog lank as bewys dien dat Jake se ring daar was. Nes Jake vir altyd in haar hart sal wees.

Sy het vinnig teruggestaan en toe uit die kamer geloop. Sy het Sierra haastig langsaan toe geneem en toe reguit hiernatoe gery. Die nuus het nog nie heeltemal by haar ingesink nie. Sy moet haarself nog oortuig dat hierdie verskriklike ding regtig gebeur het. Dat Joe in Manhattan se strate geskiet en

dodelik gewond is.

Jamie parkeer en val agter die ry mense in wat vir die veerboot wag. Toe sy aan boord is, loop sy na die oorkant sodat sy eerste kan afstap wanneer hulle die hawe bereik. Dis donker, maar die wolkkombers keer die ergste koue. Sy kry 'n plek naby die reling en staar na die horison.

*Here ... moenie dat hy doodgaan nie. Lei die dokters en wees by Wanda. Asseblief, Vader.*

Toe die vrede kom, ontspan sy vir die eerste keer.

Sy was altyd doodbang vir tragedie. Vir die nuus amper net soveel as vir die werklike gebeurtenis. Dis nog iets wat die terroriste-aanvalle haar geleer het – hoe om slegte nuus te hanteer. Niks kan vergelyk met die ontsetting wat sy daardie oggend in die gimnasium ervaar het toe sy die brandende World Trade Center op die TV gesien het nie.

Sy bid elke paar minute dringend vir Joe. Maar in haar binneste is sy kalm, weet sy dat oorlewing moontlik is – selfs midde-in groot verlies. Daarom is haar gedagtes nie net by Joe terwyl die boot oor die water vaar nie. Sy dink ook aan Clay en Jake en Sierra en die lewe.

En aan haar openbaring op die strand.

Dis nie dat sy vir die lewe weggekruipt het nie. Sy het die dood nie bewustelik bo die lewe gekies nie, nie aan die begin nie. Haar werk by St. Paul's was haar manier om die lewe te kies. Dis wat gemaak het dat sy haarself soggens uit die bed kon sleep.

Maar ná twee jaar se vrywilligerwerk, ná al die verhale van verlies, die gebede saam met treurende geliefdes en die baie troos, het Jamie gegroei. Sy het nie meer 'n rede nodig om soggens op te staan nie. Die feit dat God nog 'n oggend vir haar gegee het, is rede genoeg.

Hetsy sy die dag saam met Sierra of die mense by St. Paul's deurbring, sy voel nie meer soos een van die wandelende dooies, die geknakte treurendes van die Manhattan-landskap nie. Sy is opgewonde oor die lewe, oor wat God vir haar en deur haar wil doen terwyl sy op hierdie aarde is. Dit maak net sin dat sy haar tyd by Ground Zero ontgroeit het. Sy het by St. Paul's 'n doel gevind, maar sy kan nie met haar lewe voortgaan terwyl sy daar is nie.

Sy kyk op en sien Jake se beeld in die lug bo haar, sy veelseggende glimlag en die kyk waarmee hy te kenne gee dat hy weet wat sy nou moet doen, en dat sy dit ook weet. Al wat nou vir haar oorbly, is om die besluit te neem.

“Die lewe, nè, Jake, ek moet die lewe kies?” Haar oë is wasig van die trane. “Selfs saam met iemand anders. Dis wat jy wil hê ek moet doen, nie waar nie?”

Sy oë is so helder asof hy voor haar staan, skoon en blou en met 'n liefde wat sy nie verstaan het terwyl hy nog gelewe het nie. “Jake ...”

Na 'n lang oomblik raak die beeld wasig en verdwyn in die naghemel. Ja, dis presies wat hy wil hê sy moet doen. Hy en God die Almagtige.

*Kyk, Ek het die lewe en die voorspoed, die dood en die teenspoed aan jou voorgehou ... Kies die lewe!*

Dis waarom die Here Clay in die eerste plek oor haar pad gestuur het. Dat sy in die genesingsproses voortgedring kon word, verby die punt van St. Paul's na die moontlikheid van 'n nuwe lewe.

'n Nuwe liefde.

Die blote gedagte aan Clay laat haar asem in haar keel vassteek. Hoe desperaat die situasie ook al is, sy voel 'n bietjie soos Sierra. Bang en besorg, maar met 'n hart waarin die hoop weer opgevlam het. Want oor 'n baie klein rukkie gaan sy weer vir Clay sien. En die een of ander tyd gaan sy hom van haar middag op die strand vertel, hoe sake vir haar duidelik geword het en hoe verkeerd sy voorheen was.

Hoe nodig sy hom het.

Maar wat van Joe? Wat as hy dit nie maak nie? Clay het baie bekommerd geklink. Sy wil by Clay wees, saam met hom bid en hom help glo dat alles sal uitwerk. Sy leun teen die reling asof om die boot vinniger te laat beweeg.

Hulle moet by Joe gaan sit en hom oorreed om vas te hou, want met God aan die stuur van sake, hou die lewe – ondanks al die pynlike wendings en verliese – steeds 'n wonderlike hoop in.

Jamie het besluit om die lewe te kies. Wat Joe betref, sy sal daarvoor bid.

By die dokke aangekom, kry Jamie amper dadelik 'n taxi. Sy is steeds besig om vir Joe te bid toe hulle by die hospitaal aankom en sy die bestuurder betaal. Noudat sy tot hier gekom het, kan sy nie wag om vir Clay te sien nie. Sy hardloop die portaal binne en haas haar na ongevalle.

Clay is die eerste persoon wat sy sien.

Hy sit met sy rug na haar, sy arms gekruis, kop onderstebo. Hy is in uniform en langs hom sit twee speurders in gesprek met 'n derde polisieman wat aantekeninge neem. Die mans sit aan die oorkant van die wagkamer en hulle praat in gedempte stemme.

Jamie loop nader en halfpad soontoe draai Clay om. Haar hart mis 'n slag toe hy in haar oë kyk. Hoe kon sy dit oorweeg om van hierdie man af weg te loop en hom te verloor net omdat sy broer Eric Michaels is? Die hele situasie voel nou belaglik. As Eric haar ongemaklik laat voel, kan sy immers uit sy pad bly. Maar sy kan nie van Clay af wegbly nie. Nie vir 'n oomblik langer nie.

Die oomblik toe hulle oë ontmoet, weet sy dit, verstaan sy dit met haar hele wese. Hy kom na haar toe en toe hulle omhels, is dit met hartseer en verligting. Hartseer oor Joe; verligting dat hulle te midde van die vreemde omstandighede weer bymekaar uitgekom het.

Hulle staan lank so, Clay met sy arms om haar middel, hare om sy nek. Om so by hom te wees, is meer as waarvan sy kon droom. Sy maak haar oë toe en koester die oomblik. Toe raak sy bewus van die lewe. Dit bruis deur haar en vul haar met 'n soort vreugde wat haar sprakeloos maak.

*Here ... ek wil nie hê hy moet my ooit laat gaan nie. Asseblief nie.*

Sy maak haar oë oop. Die speurders het bedagsaam weggekyk. Die wagkamer bied min privaatheid, maar ten minste kyk die ander nie na hulle nie. Sy druk haar gesig teen Clay s'n, steeds gekoester in die gevoel van sy arms om haar

middel. “Hoe gaan dit met hom?”

“Hy lewe.” Clay staan terug. Hy kyk ondersoekend in haar oë. “Hulle is besig om te opereer, maar dit lyk nie goed nie. Die koeël het baie skade aangerig.” Daar is ’n donker blos op sy wange en sy uitdrukking is gefolterd. “Hulle sê ons moet die ergste verwag.”

Jamie se moed sak tot in haar skoene. “Nee ... ” Sy skud haar kop en verstyf haar greep op Clay se arms. “Ons mag nie opgee nie.”

“Ek weet.” ’n Vasberadenheid vul sy oë. “Ek bid nog die hele tyd.”

“Ek ook.” Sy bly stil. Dis seker nie nou die tyd nie. Maar sy moet hom vertel, moet met hom deel wat nou die dag met haar gebeur het. “Clay, daar is iets wat ek wil hê jy moet weet.”

Sy oë raak besorg. Hy verwag tien teen een dat sy gaan sê dat sy vanaand net gekom het om hom te ondersteun. Nie omdat sy van besluit verander het oor Clay en die situasie met Eric nie.

“Ontspan. Ek dink jy gaan bly wees.”

Hy kyk fronsend na haar. “Bly?”

“Ja.” Haar mondhoëke lig en sy streel oor die lyne oor sy voorkop. “Ek en Sierra sal graag by jou en jou familie kom Thanksgiving hou.” Ten spyte van die hartseer en pyn oor Joe, voel sy hoe haar oë verhelder. “Dis natuurlik te sê as ons nog welkom is.”

“Wat van Eric?” Hy skuif sy hande oor haar skouers en bestudeer haar gesig. Asof sy dalk gaan verdwyn as hy haar nie vashou nie. “Is jy oukei met Eric? Ons gaan by hulle huis eet.”

“Die Here het iets vir my gewys.” Haar arms gaan weer om sy nek. “Ek het Jake op 11 September verloor; hy het nooit teruggekom nie.” Die hartseer wel in haar op, maar sy druk deur. “Elke herinnering wat ek daarna gehad het, was nie van Jake nie; dit was van Eric. ’n Vreemdeling wat by ons kom bly het sodat hy kon leer om die soort pa en gesinsman te wees wat God wou hê.”

Clay knik en kyk diep in haar oë asof om seker te maak dat sy glo wat sy sê. “Bedoel jy dit?”

“Ja.” Nadat sy hom ’n paar lang oomblikke vasgehou het, laat sy hom gaan en kyk weer in sy oë. “Eric was nooit Jake nie, en as hy nie Jake was nie, is daar mos nie ’n probleem nie? Hy is net ’n goeie ou wat baie soos my oorlede man lyk.”

Vir ’n oomblik hang Clay se mond oop. Toe skud hy sy kop. “Ek het hiervoor gebid, Jamie. Dat jy sal verstaan. Maar toe jy nie my oproepe beantwoord nie, het ek ... ”

“Toemaar.” Sy hou haar vinger oor sy mond. “Ek verstaan.” Hulle laat mekaar gaan en sy lei hom na twee stoele ’n entjie van die ander speurders af. Toe hulle gaan sit, vleg sy haar vingers deur syne. “Ons het vanaand nog ’n wonderwerk nodig. Kom ons bid vir Joe.”

Clay kyk nog ’n oomblik na haar voordat hy sy kop laat sak en begin bid. Nes Jamie, smee hy God dat Joe sal lewe en dat hy geen permanente skade van die koeëlwond sal oorhou nie.

Hy het net klaar gebid toe Wanda daar aankom. Haar oë is wild van vrees en toe sy hulle sien, begin sy huil. “Jamie!”

Jamie gaan haar tegemoet en hou haar vas toe haar bene wil meegee. Clay is dadelik by om Wanda tot by ’n stoel te help. Sy is duiselig van skok. Toe sy tussen hulle sit, sak sy vooroor asof sy teen ’n oorweldigende paniek probeer baklei. “Hoe gaan dit? Kan ek hom sien?”

Clay bring haar op hoogte en toe hy haar vertel wat Joe se kanse is, begin Wanda onbegaanlik huil. Sy klou aan hulle albei vas.

“Ek’t ... ek’t te lank gewag!” Sy kry skaars asemgehaal deur haar snikke. “Ek ... ek kan hom nie nou verloor nie.” Sy kyk na Jamie, die selfverwyte duidelik op haar gesig. “Ek is lief vir hom, Jamie. Ek het hom lief.”

Hulle bly die grootste deel van die nag so bymekaar, lank nadat die ander speurders kom rapporteer het dat die twee verdagtes en vier ander mans gearresteer is – almal deel van die dwelmnetwerk wat vir die moord in die stegie sowel as ’n magdom ander onopgeloste sake verantwoordelik is. Nadat hulle die nuus oorgedra het, simpatiseer die ander speurders en groet.

In die ure wat volg, bly hulle so, Jamie en Clay aan weerskante van Wanda. Hulle maak beurte om haar vas te hou en te troos terwyl sy huil, en luister wanneer sy oor Joe praat, oor hoe sy hom gemis het en waarom sy dit nie vroeër vir hom kon sê nie.

“Pure trots, dis wat dit was.” Iewers in die oggendure kom sy tot hierdie slotsom. “Ek sou hom daardie selfde dag nog gebel het as dit nie vir my vervloekte trots was nie.”

*Jamie kyk vinnig na Clay terwyl die verligting deur haar spoel. Dankie, Here ... dankie dat dit nie tien jaar later is en ek hierdie woorde oor Clay sê nie.*

Die nag sleep voort en die dokters kom lewer twee maal verslag dat daar geen verandering is nie. Joe se toestand is steeds kritiek. Hy is steeds aan ’n asemhalingsmasjien gekoppel en sy liggaam het nog nie ná die swaar bloedverlies en inwendige beserings gestabiliseer nie. Jamie is gedaan, maar hulle moet uithou. Daar behoort nou weer enige oomblik nuus te kom.

Die groepie raak stil, verlore in hulle eie gebede en gedagtes. Om en by seweur die oggend is Clay besig om op en af voor die venster te loop toe die dokter by die wagkamer inkom. Wanda, wat met haar gesig in haar hande gesit het, kyk op.

Die man glimlag.

Hulle al drie is onmiddellik op hulle voete, maar Clay is die enigste een wat iets kan uitkry. “Hoe gaan dit?”

“Ek het eintlik nie woorde nie. ’n Halfuur gelede het sy lewenstekens ’n skielike verbetering getoon. Ons het hom van die asemhalingsmasjien afgehaal en hy vaar goed.” Die dokter skud sy kop. “Báie goed. Amper asof iemand lewe in hom ingeblaas het.”

“Dank die Vader ...” Wanda lig haar vingers stadig na haar mond. Sy kyk van Clay na Jamie. “Die laaste uur het ek anders begin bid. Ek het vir die Here gesê as Hy Joe sou spaar, sou ek die res van my lewe by hom bly en saam met



hom die Here dien, soos ons van die begin af moes doen.”

Jamie kry ’n koue rilling.

Die dokter knik begrypend. “Ek het hierdie belewenis al te dikwels gehad om daaraan te twyfel. God doen vandag nog wonderwerke; ek’s oortuig daarvan.”

Hy bly stil. “Julle sit al die hele nag hier. Julle kan gou by hom kom inloer as julle wil. Hy is besig om by te kom.”

“Dankie, God!” Wanda omhels die dokter. “Hy het my nog ’n kans gegee!”

Jamie vryf oor haar arms. Hoe is dit moontlik? Twee ure gelede het Joe se lewe aan ’n baie dun draadjie gehang en nou haal hy op sy eie asem en is hy besig om by te kom. God se kragtige werk is genoeg om haar op haar knieë te laat gaan.

Clay neem haar hand en hulle volg die dokter na Joe se kamer. Hy is aan ’n halfdosyn masjiene gekoppel en daar is pype wat na sy neus en arms lei. Maar andersins lyk hy goed. Sy middellyf is verbind en ’n laken is halflyf oor hom getrek.

Wanda kyk na die dokter. “Kan ek ... kan ek aan hom vat?”

Joe beweeg sy lippe en probeer moeisaam keel skoonmaak. “Dok ...” sy stem is skor. “Dis my Wanda.” Hy sukkel en gryns. “Jy beter ... ja sê.”

“Joe!” Sy plaas haar hande aan weerskante van sy gesig en soen hom vol op die mond. “Ek’s jammer! Dit was nie jou skuld nie, dit was myne.” Sy huil weer, huil en glimlag terwyl sy hom vashou nes Jamie Clay ’n paar uur tevore vasgehou het. Haar woorde tuimel amper onverstaanbaar oormekaar. “Ek moes agter jou aangekom het toe Jimmy dood is, maar toe maak ek ’n simpel fout en verloor jou. Ek het jou verloor, maar dit was my trots.” Sy skep vinnig asem. “My vervlakste trots. Dit het gemaak dat ek nie gebel het toe ek moes nie, en nou het dit my amper gekeer om iets baie, baie belangriks vir jou te sê, want Joe Reynolds, ek het die vreeslikste trots! Maar raai wat.”

Hy maak sy oë effens oop tot hy haar sien. “Jy het die ... snelpraat-kompetisie gewen?”

Sy bly stil en kom halforent. Dan verhelder haar oë en sy kyk na Jamie en Clay. “Hy gaan regkom! As hy weer kan grappies maak, gaan hy regkom.”

Die skrefies om Joe se oë word groter. Hy kyk om hom rond en gryns toe hy hom hoër teen die kussing opwerk. “Michaels?”

“Hier is ek.” Clay gee ’n tree vorentoe.

“Sê vir my hulle het daardie vente vang.” Sy woorde is stadig, maar hy is duidelik besig om geleidelik weer homself te word.

Clay glimlag en Jamie kom staan langs hom. “Ons manne het hulle ingebring. Sonder probleme.”

“Poging tot moord?” Hy slaag daarin om flou te glimlag.

Jamie verstaan. *Poging* tot moord, want Joe is vas van plan om die skietvoorval te oorleef. Sy voel iets warmes deur haar versprei, en sy weet wat dit is. ’n Blye versekering. Die sekerheid dat God nie net een wonderwerk in hulle midde gedoen het nie. Nie net het Hy haar tot die besef gebring dat sy weer vir Clay kan sien nie. Maar Hy het Joe se lewe wonderbaarlik gespaar.

Clay gee nog 'n tree nader en plaas sy hand op Joe se knie. “Meer as dit.” Hy kyk na Jamie. “Die polisie het die ouens ook vir dwelmshandel en 'n ander moord gesoek. Hulle was deel van 'n netwerk.”

“Dis vreeslik.” Jamie voel die kleur uit haar wange gaan.

“Ja.” Clay se kyk verklap dat hy dit heeltnag geweet het, maar verkies het om dit nie vroeër met hulle te deel nie.

Jamie kyk na die vloer voor haar voete, te geskok om te praat. Die vrees klop dans rondom haar hart, maar dit raak nie aan haar nie. Dit kon netsowel Clay gewees het. Sy kyk in sy oë en haak haar arm deur syne. “Ek’s net bly hulle is gevang.”

Joe knik stadig vir Jamie en kyk dan na Clay. “Waarvoor is hulle nog aangekeer?”

“Behalwe poging tot moord?” Clay glimlag vir sy vriend. “Vir die moord in die steeg en 'n spul dwelmaanklagte.”

Joe lig sy kop effens. “Was hulle die moordenaars?”

“Ons is nie seker wie geskiet het nie, maar die polisie dink een van die twee is hulle ou.”

“Oukei. Vra nou vir die dokter wanneer ek kan huis toe gaan.” Sy stem is nog krapperig en sy woorde kom stadig. Hy glimlag vir Wanda. “Hierdie nuus moet gevier word.”

“Nie so vinnig nie.” Wanda soen hom op die wang. Die atmosfeer verander toe sy ernstig in sy oë kyk. “Jy moet beter word, Joe. En wanneer jy Los Angeles toe gaan, moet jy my en die kinders saam met jou vat.” Haar stem is sager. Die histeriese gehuil en uitgelatenheid van vroeër het plek gemaak vir 'n diep warmte wat die vertrek vul. “Ek het jou lief, Joe Reynolds. Die Here het my 'n kans gegee om dit vir jou te sê. Hierdie keer gaan ek dit nie laat verbygaan nie.”

Clay neem Jamie weer in sy arms. Hierdie keer is hulle omhelsing nie desperaat soos toe sy by die hospitaal aangekom het nie, maar salig spontaan. Hy fluister naby haar oor. “Ek dink ons moet hulle alleen laat.”

“Ek ook.” Jamie onderdruk 'n laggie en verloor haarself in Clay se oë. “Jy moet buitendien 'n oproep gaan maak.”

“Moet ek?” Hy vryf sy neus teen hare.

“Ja.” Noudat Joe buite gevaar is, kan sy haar oorgee aan die gevoelens wat hy in haar wakker maak. Sy wil hom soen, wil haar in sy arms verloor. Maar daar is eers iets anders waarna hulle moet omsien.

“Nou goed, juffrou Jamie.” Hy hou haar teen hom vas, 'n lui glimlag om sy mond en sy oë vol begeerte. “Wie wil jy hê moet ek bel?”

“Jou broer, sodat jy vir hom kan sê dat ek en Sierra vir Thanksgiving kom.”

# Chapter TWENTY-FIVE

Jamie was nervous.

Whatever she told herself or Clay or Sue or anyone else, her stomach was tight and her heart raced even when she was sitting still. For three years she had accepted she would never see Eric Michaels again, and now, in a few days, she was about to do just that. The level of anxiety over the matter hit her again the Wednesday morning before Thanksgiving. She was about to have dinner with Eric and his wife; the idea still seemed like something from a dream.

Or a nightmare.

The flight took forever, and Jamie tried not to think about Eric. There were more pressing matters. How fast the plane could fly, for instance. Only two days had passed since she'd been with Clay, but she couldn't wait to see him. It seemed forever before the plane finally circled over Burbank and came in for a smooth landing.

"I'm excited, Mommy. I've never seen California." Sierra squeezed Jamie's hand as they stepped off the plane and onto the jetway.

"I think you'll like it." Jamie grinned at her. They held hands as they headed down the concourse toward security. She spotted Clay just as his eyes found her through the crowd.

"Look!" Sierra let go of her hand and did a few jumps. "It's Clay! Can I go see him?"

Jamie laughed, her eyes still locked on his. "Just don't knock anyone down."

She took off toward Clay, her red backpack bouncing, and when she reached him, she threw her arms around his waist. He stooped down and handed her a long-stemmed white rose. Then he gave her a red one and nodded toward Jamie.

"Mommy!" Sierra ran the few feet that separated them and handed the flower over. "Here! It's from Clay."

Jamie stopped and took the rose. She looked at Clay and thanked him with her eyes. A few seconds later she and Sierra were at his side. He leaned close and kissed Jamie. "I missed you." He spoke the words low, near her ear. "Two days felt like forever."

"I know." Her cheeks burned, but she didn't chide herself. So what if she felt like a schoolgirl in Clay's presence? She refused to feel guilty or ashamed. God had brought him into her life, everything about him was a blessing from God. The feelings he stirred in her heart were something everyone should be so blessed to feel.

The three of them went to the baggage area, where they found Jamie's suitcase and Sierra's duffel bag, then they headed for Clay's Jeep. As they walked, Sierra rattled on about Wrinkles staying with the neighbor and how she'd explained the trip to the cat so the cat wouldn't worry about her.

"But did you take the dress-up clothes to the neighbor's house?" Clay tried to look serious. "What will Wrinkles do without his fancy socks for a whole week?"

Sierra giggled and skipped along between them. "You're silly, Clay."

"Only with my jester hat."

By the time Jamie and Sierra checked in to their hotel, and the three of them found lunch, the day was almost over. They spent the afternoon touring Hollywood and Malibu Beach.

Every hour or so Jamie remembered that the meeting with Eric was coming. But for the most part her anxiety didn't interfere with the day.

They had dinner at Gladstone's on the beach and were back at the hotel by nine o'clock. Clay walked them to their door and made sure they got inside safely. Sierra was digging through her duffel bag looking for her nightgown when Clay bid them good-bye.

Before he left, Jamie stepped just into the hallway, pulled the door partially shut behind her, and smiled at him. "I can't believe we had dinner on the beach in November."

"I told you." He raised an eyebrow at her. "California's not too bad."

His arms circled her waist and drew her close.

“Mmmm.” She looked deep into his eyes. “I’m beginning to see that.”

He searched her face, and it was clear what he was thinking before he said it. “Are you okay? About tomorrow?”

“Yes.” Her smile eased. It was the truth. She was nervous, yes. But not enough to stop her from going ahead with the meeting. “I’m fine.”

“Good.” He took one hand from her waist and slid his fingers along the side of her face. “I’m so glad you came, Jamie.”

“Me too.” He was going to kiss her, and she could hardly wait. But just as he moved closer, a split second before his lips touched hers, Sierra opened the door.

“Hey, guys!” She had her nightgown in her hands. At the sight of the two of them, she giggled.

Jamie exhaled her frustration, then shook her head with a laugh. “Did you need something, dear?”

She giggled again. “My toothbrush.”

“On that note...” Clay took a step back and chuckled. “Guess I better get going.” He winked at Sierra and gave Jamie a look that would make it hard to fall asleep later. “I had a wonderful day.”

“Me too.” Sierra grinned at him, clearly happy that the two of them had been hugging.

“I think we all did.” Jamie hoped he could read her eyes, that given the chance she would’ve spent as long as he liked kissing him in the hallway. But once again the moment would have to wait.

Clay left, and Sierra was asleep in fifteen minutes. But not Jamie. She lay there, staring at the ceiling, half the time wondering what she was doing, the other half wishing morning would come.

She wasn’t sure when she drifted to sleep, but when she woke the next morning, she sat straight up, overcome by a burst of anxiety that made her head spin and left her sick to her stomach. Once as a young girl she visited Six Flags with her parents on a day when there were no lines. Ten

rides on the giant wooden roller coaster and she wasn't sure she'd ever feel normal again.

That's how she felt now.

She looked at Sierra, sleeping in the other bed. Maybe they shouldn't have come; she hadn't told Sierra the truth about Eric, that he was Clay's brother. Now it might feel rushed, forced. She wasn't sure why she'd waited so long. Maybe because the news would be difficult for Sierra; maybe because it would be too difficult for herself.

She glanced at her suitcase. She could still do it. Grab her clothes, stuff them inside, wake Sierra, and catch a cab to the airport. It wasn't too late.

The air in the hotel room was stuffy. Jamie stood, went to the window, and opened the drapes. She pressed her forehead against the cool glass and realized she was holding her breath. No wonder the air felt stuffy; she wasn't getting any of it.

She exhaled.

As she did so, she found a point of balance again. She was here because she wanted to be, because the strength of her feelings for Clay Michaels wouldn't be denied. Maybe they would wind up friends, Internet pen pals who kept in touch from opposite sides of the country. Or maybe one day they'd be something much more.

But Eric?

She took in a slow breath and stared at the already busy Ventura Boulevard, just beyond the parking lot. Eric was a nice man with an uncanny resemblance to Jake. But Eric wasn't Jake, nor was he some ex-lover she needed to avoid. He'd never belonged to her, not even when she thought she was married to him.

So what was the problem? Why the nervous stomach and—

“Mommy?”

Jamie spun around and found a quick smile. “Good morning, honey.” She crossed the room and sat on the edge of Sierra's bed. “Happy

Thanksgiving.”

She rubbed her eyes and gave Jamie a sleepy grin. “What time is Clay coming?”

“In a few hours.”

It was time to tell Sierra the truth. Jamie brushed her daughter’s bangs with her fingertips and felt a lump in her throat. Sierra had been just four when the terrorist attacks hit. Chances were she wouldn’t recognize Eric if they passed on the street.

“I like when you play with my hair, Mommy.” Sierra leaned back into the pillow, a dreamy look on her face.

“I like it too.”

Jamie studied her daughter. No, Sierra might not recognize Eric, but what if something serious did come of Jamie’s relationship with Clay? One day she would have to know the truth. The same way she’d needed the truth about Eric not being Jake. Sierra deserved to know who Eric was.

Jamie cleared her throat. “Honey, I have something to tell you.” She brushed her knuckles against Sierra’s cheek. “Something about Clay’s brother.”

Sierra made a face. “Clay’s brother? We’re having dinner at his place today, right?”

“Yes.” Fear was making a logjam of her throat. Jamie swallowed hard. “Sweetie, this is sort of a strange thing.” She uttered a soft laugh. “I don’t really believe it myself, but here’s the deal. Remember the man who looked like Daddy? The one in your picture on your dresser?”

Sierra leaned up on her elbows, more interested than before. “My second daddy, the one with his own family.”

“Right, well—” she pursed her lips, searching for the words—“that man is Clay’s brother.” She hesitated. “Isn’t that strange?”

“Clay’s brother is Mr. Michaels, the man we thought was Daddy?” Sierra sat all the way up now, her eyes wide.

“Yes.” Jamie slumped. Clearly Sierra thought about Eric; otherwise

she wouldn't have remembered his name. She clenched her fists. "I'm sorry, honey. I didn't know about this when I met Clay that day on the ferryboat. I just found out a little while ago."

"They're brothers?" Sierra looked toward the window, eyes distant.

"Yes." Jamie braced herself for what was ahead. Sierra might break down and cry, even be afraid to see the man again. Or maybe she would be confused, unwilling to go to the Thanksgiving dinner.

Instead Sierra turned her eyes back to Jamie and clapped her hands. "So I get to see Clay *and* Mr. Michaels, all in one day?"

Once again Jamie couldn't draw a breath. She was too intent on her daughter, waiting for the bad reaction she'd been dreading. "You're... you're not upset?"

"No." Sierra's eyes danced. "Remember, Mommy? I told you I wanted to see him again, the man I thought was my daddy." She grinned. "Now I get to." Her feet slid over the edge of the bed and she hopped onto the floor. "It's going to be the bestest Thanksgiving Day ever."

"But he's not your daddy." Jamie searched her daughter's eyes. "You understand that, right?"

Sierra's smile faded. "Daddy died in the Twin Towers." She paused, thoughtful. "Mr. Michaels might look like him, but he isn't him. I know that."

Jamie exhaled. All that worry, all the dread, and of the two of them, her daughter had the best grip on the situation. Jamie felt herself relax, and almost at the same time she looked at the clock. "Yikes." She tousled Sierra's long golden hair. "We'd better get ready."

Anxiety played with Jamie's mind while she showered and did her hair, even into the final minutes before Clay arrived. But the moment she saw him, her fears faded. They hugged, and his eyes held the questions she'd been asking herself all morning.

"I'm fine." She grabbed her purse and Sierra's hand. "Let's go have Thanksgiving dinner." She grinned at her daughter. "Sierra says it's going



to be the bestest one yet.”

They left the room happy and laughing and looking forward to the day. Because no matter how strange or bizarre the situation was, no matter how uncomfortable she might feel in Eric’s house, meeting his wife, watching him with his family, it didn’t matter.

Her feelings for Clay Michaels were stronger.

Eric looked out the window for the fifth time in as many minutes. His heart thudded deep within him, the way it did every time he stopped moving. They would be there any minute, Clay and Jamie and Sierra.

He understood his pounding heart. It simply wouldn’t believe it was possible. Clay went to New York City and met Jamie Bryan? The woman he’d learned to love in those terrible days after September 11? The woman he’d worked so hard to put out of his mind?

There had been no wavering in Clay’s voice when he called. His feelings for Jamie were strong and certain. Yes, she’d struggled with the idea that the two of them were brothers. She hadn’t planned on seeing him again, any more than he’d planned on seeing her. But apparently she’d reached some sort of resolution in her mind, because she had flown to Los Angeles with Sierra, and now—at any time—she would be there.

Jamie Bryan. Walking into his world.

The last time they were together they’d had an emotional intimacy that was typically reserved for married couples. And why not? For more than two months they both believed they were married.

And what about Sierra?

It had killed him to tell her good-bye. He remembered it still, his last morning with her, curling her hair and holding back tears as she chattered about her little friend. Katy, wasn’t it? And how nice it was that Mommy was going to church with them. And he had told her that next week maybe Mommy should curl her hair, that Mommy might do an even better job than him.

Eric pushed the memories away and stared out the window, searching for Clay's Jeep.

They'd told Josh the facts, that his uncle Clay had met up with the woman Eric had lived with. They'd told their son about Eric's time in New York before. But the blank look on Josh's face the other day told Eric that at eleven years old, his son still didn't quite understand. He seemed content that his parents were happy; nothing else mattered.

Josh was upstairs getting ready now; same with Laura.

A car pulled onto their street, but it was too small to be Clay's. Eric had to watch for them, had to see them pull up. Because unless he saw it for himself, he wouldn't believe it. Jamie Bryan? About to walk through his door? Not just Jamie, but Sierra. Sweet little Sierra, the little girl who captured his heart from the moment he woke up in a New York hospital with amnesia.

She would be...how old? Seven, at least.

The memories stirred in his soul, lifting and falling and taking wind like the last remains of autumn's fallen leaves.

Had it been three years since that final good-bye? He could see it all, feel the emotions from that day. The way he'd hugged Sierra in the entryway of her home, hours before his flight back to Los Angeles. He and Jamie had agreed to keep up the facade, pretending he was her daddy. She was too young to understand anything different. And so, in keeping with the act, he bid her good-bye the way he might've any other time. He played with her curls and at her request he promised to give her a horsie ride that night when he returned.

Only he never returned. Because by then he'd figured out who he was and where he belonged. Two hours later he stood in LaGuardia Airport telling Jamie good-bye, hugging her, holding her. Thanking her for helping him find his way back. They held hands until the last minute, when Laura appeared in the distance with a stream of passengers.

What he'd told Clay several weeks earlier had been right on. His

physical healing, and the transformation in his life, had been only part of the miracle. The other part was that he'd been able to leave Jamie.

He felt someone behind him and he turned. "Laura."

Her expression was pained. "Do you have to stand there waiting like that?" Her voice was soft, defeated. "She'll be here soon enough."

"Hey." He pulled away from the window and faced her. A quiet warmth filled his tone. "Laura...don't be like that. This isn't my fault."

"It isn't anyone's fault. That's just it." She hugged herself tight. "Fault doesn't change how I feel."

He ran his knuckle along her brow. "How do you feel?"

"Scared." Her answer was quick, pointed. "Sometimes scared to death."

"Ah, Laura..." His heart went out to her. Of course she was anxious. The whole situation was too strange to believe. He brushed a piece of her blonde hair off her face and touched his lips to hers. "Clay met a woman and fell in love. The woman happened to be Jamie Bryan. It has nothing to do with you and me, okay? Don't be afraid."

"I'm trying not to, Eric." She looked straight to his heart. "You lived with her for three months. I keep thinking..." She hesitated and lifted her hands. "I don't know. I keep thinking you must've been in love with her." Defeat colored her eyes again. "I picture you spending that much time with another woman and I can't help but wonder what it was like. Not just the physical stuff, but the emotional connection."

He ached for the pain in her eyes. This was the road they never traveled, the one that took him back in time to Jamie Bryan. He'd been honest with her from the beginning, but once he'd shared the details, he locked them away in a place he never intended to go again. Over the years, when she expressed doubts about that time in his life, he quickly dismissed them.

But now...

"Laura." He took gentle hold of her shoulders. "I kept nothing from

you. Yes..." He swallowed, praying she would believe him. Grateful it was the truth. "We kissed a few times, but nothing more. Neither of us wanted to be intimate unless I remembered."

"But you must've loved her, Eric. Or at least felt like you loved her."

This was the hard part. What was love, really? Eric leaned against the windowpane. "I thought I was her husband; I allowed myself to *believe* I loved her." He hung his head and rubbed the muscles in his neck. When he looked up he exhaled hard. "I thought it was the right thing, Laura. Whatever it was, God used it for good. But you know how I feel. I left Jamie planning to never look back."

She held his eyes for a long time. Then she nodded, her expression still troubled, but less doubtful. "Okay." She leaned up and kissed his cheek. "Maybe it's a bad case of morning sickness." She blew a wisp of hair off her forehead. "Anyway, Josh is still in the shower. I have to finish my makeup." She bit her lip. "I don't want to be out here when they pull up."

He waited until she was gone, then he turned around and looked out the window. If only the memories weren't so vivid. How many times after they knew the truth about his blood type, and before he realized who he was, had she looked in his eyes and told him what she was feeling.

That sometimes she hoped he would stay forever and never find his way back.

He drew in a sharp breath and sat on the edge of the windowsill.

After he left her, it was all he could do to put her out of his mind. God had given him the best way. He prayed for her. It wasn't something he talked about with anyone but God, but it was the least he could do. The least and the most.

Daily, hourly sometimes, he prayed that Jamie and Sierra would survive the loss of first Jake, and then him, his presence in their lives. That Jamie would grow strong in her new faith and lean on Christ when she wasn't sure she could make it through another day. And that ultimately,

one day—if her heart allowed it—she might find someone else to love.

That was the most amazing part. All those prayers, all that time when he asked God to take care of Jamie, he still could hardly let himself believe this was the answer he'd prayed about. His own brother? A chill passed over his arms. *God...Your ways are so far beyond ours. Get us through this day, please. Let it be okay with everyone. For Clay's sake...and Jamie's.*

*Be still...and know that I am God.*

What? Eric stood up. He leaned against the window frame and closed his eyes. The response was so quick, so clear. Often when he prayed, he had a sense, a knowing that the Lord wanted him to do one thing or another. But this time...

The answer had been audible. Maybe not in the way most people might hear it. But no question someplace in his soul Eric had *heard* the words. *Be still and know that I am God.* It was a verse he'd learned first from Jake Bryan's Bible. During his days of amnesia, it had taught Eric he couldn't rush God, couldn't force himself to remember. Rather, he was to be still and let God do the work.

Now God was calling him to that again. Be still and wait; and know that whatever happened that day, God was in control.

His mouth was dry, his heart heavy with the weight of his memories. He went to the kitchen, put the kettle on, and grabbed a mug. A cup of coffee would help clear the cobwebs. After a few minutes the water came to a boil, and just as he poured his cup, he heard a knock at the door and the sound of it opening.

"Eric?" Clay's happy voice didn't sound forced, but it wasn't quite natural either.

No wonder. Clay couldn't help but feel the strain of the situation, same as the rest of them. "Coming." He left his coffee on the counter and headed for the front door.

Clay was just walking through the door. "Jamie's getting something from the car." He stepped inside.

Behind him came Sierra. A taller, older version of Sierra.

She saw him and there was a flicker of recognition. “Hi, Mr. Michaels.” Her chin stayed tucked close to her chest, her eyes shy and nervous.

Eric’s throat was thick. Too thick to speak. She was different now, not the same sprite she’d been as a four-year-old. This Sierra was more mature, touched by sorrow. He held out his arms. “Hi, Sierra.”

With slow, uncertain steps she came and hugged him. Then she looked into his eyes and smiled. “My mom told me about when you lived with us.” Her eyes softened and in them was a hint of the Sierra he’d so easily loved as a daughter. “I understand now.”

“Sierra understands a lot.” Clay stood a few feet away, his eyes damp.

At the sound of Clay’s voice, Sierra lit up, skipped across the room, and took Clay’s hand. Suddenly she was just a taller version of the girl Eric had known. “We have to tell him about Wrinkles and the jester hat, okay?”

Eric blinked. What was this? Sierra barely remembered him, but Clay...clearly she was taken with him. A strange sort of pain seared Eric’s heart, but only for an instant. This was what he had prayed for. It was right. The little Sierra, the one he gave butterfly kisses to, was gone forever. She had never belonged to him in the first place, but to her father, Jake Bryan.

And by the way things looked, this new Sierra belonged to Clay.

Footsteps sounded in the doorway, and Eric felt his heart stand still. Jamie walked in, looking exactly as he remembered her, and her eyes found his. In her hands was a thick bouquet of orange and yellow flowers. She hesitated. “These are for you and Laura.” Her voice was thick.

He remembered enough to know she was on the verge of tears. His eyes looked deep into hers, to the places they’d shared together. “Thanks.” There was a sound from upstairs. “Laura’ll be down in a minute.”

“Good. I’m anxious to meet her.”

Eric shifted his weight. He wasn’t sure what to do, whether to go to her the way he wanted to, tell her he was so glad she’d survived the past

few years. Or whether to keep his distance.

In the end she made the first move. She set the flowers down near the door and erased the years between them in a single heartbeat. Her arms came around his neck and he held her. It was not a hug borne of passion, but of pain. A hug that allowed them to say everything they couldn't voice, everything that only the two of them would ever understand. And for a handful of seconds, they were the only two in the room.

When he took a step back, her eyes were bright with tears. But she uttered a sound that was mostly laugh. "Can you believe this?" She laughed again and wiped at her eyes.

"No." He cleared his throat, trying to push his words past his emotions. "I knew I wouldn't believe it until you walked through the door."

"Me neither." She took his hands, squeezed them once and let go. "It's amazing."

"It is." And that's when he noticed it. There was something different about her. Something in her easy smile, a depth in her eyes. Then it hit him.

She was at peace.

In their short time together, he'd never seen her like this. First, because she was so determined to help him remember that he was Jake; next, because of the doubts that eventually crept in; and finally because she had to help him find his real identity. Even in the end, when she'd found faith in Christ and strength enough to let him go, even when she told him good-bye at LaGuardia, she wasn't at peace. Not like she was now.

He returned her smile. As strange as things were, this...this meeting again was going to be okay. He could feel it in his soul.

The moment changed. Memories faded and yesterday melted away. Eric took another step back and felt himself being brought back to the present. The entire exchange with Jamie had taken no more than a few seconds, and now he turned his attention to Clay. "Hey, brother. Glad

you're here." He shook Clay's hand and grinned. "You know Laura's turkeys."

"Okay, I heard my name." Laura was at the top of the stairs, with Josh behind her. Her voice sounded as bright and sunny as she looked. Gone were the doubts and fears from her eyes. In their place was the confidence Eric loved. Confidence and cheerfulness and an underlying determination that she would not play victim that day.

She took the stairs with a spring in her step, hugged Clay, and then smiled first at Sierra, then at Jamie. "I'm Laura." She put her hand on Jamie's shoulder. "I'm glad you could come."

Whatever Laura had done upstairs must've involved more than makeup and mirrors. For this sort of transformation, she probably spent most of the time on her knees. Eric's love for her swelled. *You go, Laura. Thata girl.*

Jamie picked up the flowers and handed them to her. "These are for you." She gave Laura a warm smile. "Thanks...for making us feel welcome."

"Well—" she returned the smile, utterly genuine—"I imagine God brought us together to be friends."

"Yes." Jamie's eyes were wet again. "I think so too."

Laura turned to Josh. "This is Josh, he's eleven."

"Hi." Jamie shook his hand. "You have a nice home here." She smiled at Clay and reached for Sierra's hand. "This is my daughter, Sierra."

Laura put her hands on her knees and stooped down. "Sierra. What a pretty name." She angled her head. "I'm glad you're here."

Sierra returned to her place by Clay. "Thank you."

From where he stood, Eric watched the whole thing, beaming. He looked around the room at Clay and Sierra, Jamie and Laura and Josh and suddenly Laura looked at him, a look that lingered. Her eyes sparkled and in her smile he saw something. It wasn't an act. Laura was okay. Despite all the worry she was going to be fine.



In fact, they all were.

## Vyf-en-twintig

Jamie is op haar senuwees.

Wat sy ook al vir Clay of Sue of wie ook al gesê het, haar maag is op 'n knop en haar hart klop vinnig, maak nie saak of sy sit of staan nie. Drie jaar lank het sy aanvaar dat sy Eric Michaels nooit weer sou sien nie, en nou, oor 'n paar dae, is dit presies wat gaan gebeur. Die angstigheid bekruij haar weer die Woensdagoggend voor Thanksgiving. Sy gaan baie binnekort saam met Eric en sy vrou aan tafel sit; die idee voel steeds soos iets uit 'n droom.

Of 'n nagmerrie.

Die vlug duur 'n ewigheid, en Jamie probeer om nie aan Eric te dink nie. Daar is dringender sake. Hoe vinnig die vliegtuig kan vlieg, byvoorbeeld. Daar het nog net twee dae verloop sedert sy by Clay was, maar sy kan nie wag om hom te sien nie. Dit voel soos 'n ewigheid voordat die vliegtuig uiteindelik bo die lughawe draai en glad neerstryk.

“Ek’s só opgewonde, Mamma. Ek was nog nooit in Kalifornië nie.” Sierra gee Jamie se hand 'n drukkie toe hulle oor die aanloopbaan aanstryk.

“Ek dink jy gaan daarvan hou.” Jamie glimlag vir haar. Hulle loop hand aan hand na die sekuriteitspunt. Sy en Clay sien mekaar gelyk raak.

“Kyk!” Sierra los haar hand en spring op en af. “Dis oom Clay! Kan ek vir hom gaan hallo sê?”

Jamie lag, haar oë steeds in syne. “Moet net nie die ander mense onderstebo stamp nie.”

Haar rooi rugsakkie wip-wip soos sy op Clay afstorm en toe sy by hom kom, gooi sy haar arms om sy lyf. Hy buk en gee vir haar 'n wit langsteelroos. Dan gee hy vir haar 'n rooie en knik na Jamie.

“Mamma!” Sierra hardloop die klein entjie na haar toe en oorhandig die blom. “Hierso! Dis van oom Clay af.”

Jamie steek vas en neem die roos. Sy kyk na Clay en sê vir hom dankie met haar oë. 'n Paar sekondes later is sy en Sierra by hom. Hy leun oor en soen Jamie. “Ek het jou gemis.” Hy praat in 'n lae stem, naby haar oor. “Hierdie twee dae het soos twee jaar gevoel.”

“Ek weet.” Haar wange brand, maar sy weier om haarself te kasty. Wat maak dit saak dat sy soos 'n skoolmeisie in Clay se teenwoordigheid voel? Sy weier om skuldig of skaam te voel. God het hom in haar lewe ingebring, en alles aan hom is 'n geskenk van die Here. Die gevoelens wat hy in haar hart wakker maak, is 'n seën wat sy almal toewens.

Hulle stap saam na die bagasie-area waar hulle Jamie se tas en Sierra se sak kry, en toe loop hulle na Clay se Jeep toe. Terwyl hulle stap, klets Sierra oor Wrinkles wat by die bure bly en hoe sy die vakansie aan die kat verduidelik

het sodat hy hom nie oor haar hoef te bekommer nie.

“Maar het jy Wrinkles se partytjieklere saamgestuur?” Clay probeer ernstig lyk. “Wat gaan Wrinkles ’n week lank sonder sy valletjieskouse maak?”

Sierra giggel en huppel tussen hulle. “Jy’s snaaks, oom Clay.”

“Net as ek my narrehoed aan het.”

Teen die tyd dat Jamie en Sierra by hulle hotel ingeteken het en hulle iets gaan eet het, is die dag halfpad verby. Die middag neem Clay hulle op ’n toer van Hollywood en Malibu Beach.

Elke dan en wan onthou Jamie dat die ontmoeting met Eric naderkom. Maar oor die algemeen meng haar angs nie met die dag in nie.

Hulle gaan eet die aand by Gladstone’s op die strand en is negeuur weer terug by die hotel. Clay loop saam tot by hulle kamer en maak seker dat hulle veilig ingaan. Sierra is by haar sak besig om haar nagklere uit te grawe toe Clay totsiens sê.

Voordat hy loop, gaan staan Jamie in die gang, trek die deur halfpad agter haar toe en glimlag vir hom. “Ek kan nie glo ons het in die hartjie van November op die strand geëet nie.”

“Ek het jou gesê.” Hy lig ’n wenkbrou. “Kalifornië is nie so sleg nie.” Hy sit sy arms om haar middel en trek haar nader.

“Mmmm.” Sy kyk diep in sy oë. “Ek begin so sien.”

Hy kyk ondersoekend in haar oë en sy weet wat hy gaan sê. “Is jy oukei? Oor môre?”

“Ja.” Haar gesig raak ernstig. Dis die waarheid. Sy is senuweeagtig, ja. Maar nie in so ’n mate dat sy die afspraak wil afstel nie. “Ek’s oukei.”

“Ek ook.” Hy wil haar soen, en sy kan beswaarlik wag. Maar net toe hy naderbeweeg, ’n fraksie van ’n sekonde voordat sy lippe aan hare raak, maak Sierra die deur oop.

“Haai, julle!” Sy het haar nagklere by haar. Toe sy hulle sien, giggel sy.

Jamie blaas haar asem gefrustreerd uit en lag toe sy haar kop skud. “Het jy iets nodig, my skat?”

Sy giggel weer. “My tandeborsel.”

“Op daardie noot ...” Clay staan terug en gee ’n laggie. “Ek moet ook in die bed kom.” Hy knipoog vir Sierra en gee Jamie ’n kyk wat haar lank uit die slaap sal hou. “Ek het ’n wonderlike dag gehad.”

“Ek ook.” Sierra glimlag vir hom, duidelik in haar noppies omdat sy hulle in ’n omhelsing betrap het.

“Ek dink ons almal het.” Jamie hoop hy kan haar oë lees, dat as sy die kans gehad het, sy hom hier in die gang sou soen, vir so lank as wat hy wou. Maar die oomblik sal moet wag.

Clay loop en vyftien minute later is Sierra vas aan die slaap. Maar Jamie lê na die plafon en kyk. Aan die een kant wonder sy waarmee sy besig is, en aan die ander kant kan sy nie wag dat die oggend moet aanbreek nie.

Sy is nie seker wanneer sy aan die slaap geraak het nie, maar toe sy die volgende oggend haar oë oopmaak, sit sy dadelik kiertsregop, skielik

oorweldig deur 'n angstigheid wat haar dronk in die kop en naar laat voel. As dogtertjie het haar ouers haar op 'n keer pretpark toe geneem. Tien ritte op die reuse wipwaentjie later was sy seker dat sy nooit weer normaal sou voel nie.

Dis presies hoe sy nou voel.

Sy kyk na die slapende Sierra op die bed langs hare. Dalk moes hulle nie gekom het nie; sy het Sierra nog nie van Eric vertel en gesê dat hy Clay se broer is nie. Nou gaan dit dalk gejaagd voel, geforseerd. Sy is nie seker waarom sy dit uitgestel het nie. Dalk omdat dit vir Sierra swaar sal wees; dalk omdat dit vir haarself te swaar sal wees.

Sy kyk na haar tas. Dis nog nie te laat nie. Sy kan haar klere gryp, dit in die tas prop, Sierra wakker maak en 'n taxi lughawe toe neem. Daar is nog tyd.

Die hotelkamer maak haar benoud. Jamie staan op en maak die gordyne oop. Sy laat sak haar voorkop teen die koel glas en besef dat sy haar asem ophou. Geen wonder die lug voel bedompig nie; sy kry niks daarvan in nie.

Sy blaas haar asem uit.

Dis asof sy haar ewewig herwin. Sy is hier omdat sy hier wil wees, omdat sy nie die omvang van haar gevoelens vir Clay Michaels kan ontken nie. Dalk sal hulle uiteindelik net vriende wees wat af en toe vir mekaar 'n e-pos stuur. Of dalk sal hulle eendag iets meer wees.

Maar Eric?

Sy trek haar asem stadig in en staar na die reeds besige Ventura Boulevard voor die hotel. Eric is 'n gawe man wat buitengewoon baie soos Jake lyk. Maar Eric is nie Jake nie, ook nie 'n ekskêrel wat sy moet vermy nie. Hy was nooit hare nie, nie eens toe sy gedink het dat hulle getroud was nie.

Nou wat is die probleem? Waarom die hol kol op haar maag en –

“Mamma?”

Jamie swaai om en glimlag vinnig. “Môre, my skat.” Sy gaan sit op die rand van Sierra se bed. “Gelukkige Thanksgiving.”

Sy vryf haar oë en glimlag nog deur die slaap. “Hoe laat kom oom Clay ons oplaai?”

“Dis nog 'n rukkie.”

Dis tyd om Sierra die waarheid te vertel. Jamie streel met haar vingerpunte oor Sierra se hare en voel 'n knop in haar keel. Sierra was maar net vier toe die terroriste-aanvalle plaasgevind het. Daar is 'n kans dat sy Eric nie eens sal herken as hulle mekaar op straat sien nie.

“Ek hou daarvan as Mamma met my hare speel.” Sierra lê terug op haar kussing, 'n dromerige kyk in haar oë.

“Ek hou ook daarvan.”

Jamie kyk ondersoekend na haar dogtertjie. Dis seker moontlik dat Sierra nie vir Eric sal herken nie, maar sê nou daar kom iets ernstigs van Jamie se verhouding met Clay? Eendag sal sy die waarheid moet hoor. Nes Jamie tot die besef moes kom dat Eric nie Jake is nie.

Jamie maak keel skoon. “Daar is iets wat ek vir jou moet sê, my skat.” Sy streel met haar kneukels oor Sierra se wang. “Dit gaan oor oom Clay se

broer.”

Sierra trek haar gesig op ’n plooi. “Oom Clay se broer? Ons gaan vandag by hulle huis eet, nè?”

“Ja.” Die vrees klamp om haar keel en Jamie sluk swaar. “My liefie, dis eintlik nogal vreemd.” Sy gee ’n sagte laggie. “Ek het self gesukkel om dit te glo. Onthou jy die man wat soos Pappa gelyk het? Die een op die foto op jou spieëlkas?”

Sierra stut haarself op haar elmboë, nou meer geïnteresseerd. “My tweede pappa, die een met sy eie gesin.”

“Dis reg. Nou ja,” sy pers haar lippe opmekaar en soek na die regte woorde, “daardie man is oom Clay se broer.” Sy aarsel. “Dis nogal vreemd, nè?”

“Is oom Clay se broer meneer Michaels, die oom wat ons gedink het Pappa is?” Sierra sit nou heeltemal regop, haar oë groot.

“Ja.” Jamie se skouers val. Dis duidelik dat Sierra soms nog aan Eric dink; anders sou sy nie sy naam onthou het nie. Sy bal haar vuiste. “Ek’s jammer, my skat. Ek het dit nie geweet toe ek oom Clay daardie dag op die veerboot ontmoet het nie. Ek het dit eers nou die dag uitgevind.”

“Is hulle boeties?” Sierra kyk na die venster, ’n veraf uitdrukking in haar oë.

“Ja.” Jamie staal haar vir wat gaan kom. Sierra kan nou enige oomblik in trane uitbars, dalk selfs bang wees om die man weer te sien. Of dalk gaan sy verward en onseker wees, nie meer lus om na die Thanksgiving-ete toe te gaan nie.

Maar in plaas daarvan kyk Sierra terug na Jamie en klap haar hande. “So ek gaan vir oom Clay én meneer Michaels al twee op een dag sien?”

Jamie kan nie asemhaal nie. Sy was te ingestel op die negatiewe reaksie wat sy gevrees het. “Jy’s ... jy’s nie ongelukkig nie?”

“Nee.” Sierra se oë dans. “Onthou Mamma dan nie? Ek het vir Mamma gesê ek wil hom weer sien, die oom wat ek gedink het my pappa is.” Sy gee ’n laggie. “En nou gaan ek.” Sy gooi haar bene oor die rand van die bed en spring af. “Dit gaan die beste Thanksgiving van my hele lewe wees.”

“Maar hy is nie jou pappa nie.” Jamie kyk ondersoekend in haar dogter se oë. “Jy weet dit, nè?”

Sierra se glimlag vervaag. “Pappa het in die Twin Towers doodgegaan.” Sy aarsel nadenkend. “Meneer Michaels het soos hy gelyk, maar ek weet hy is nie Pappa nie.”

Jamie laat haar asem uit. Al die kommer, al die vrees, en uiteindelik het Sierra meer insig in die situasie as syself. Jamie voel haarself ontspan en kyk terselfdertyd na die horlosie. “Kyk hoe laat is dit!” Sy trek haar vingers deur Sierra se lang blonde hare. “Ons sal moet regmaak.”

Jamie kan nie van die ligte angstigheid ontslae raak terwyl sy stort en haar hare versorg nie. Maar die oomblik toe Clay opdaag, neem haar vrese die wyk. Hulle gee mekaar ’n drukkie en in sy oë sien sy dieselfde vrae wat heeloggend by haar gespook het.

“Ek gaan oukei wees.” Sy neem haar handsak en Sierra se hand. “Kom ons

gaan hou Thanksgiving.” Sy glimlag vir haar dogtertjie. “Sierra sê dit gaan die beste Thanksgiving van haar hele lewe wees.”

Hulle vertrek gelukkig en geselsend en opgewonde oor die dag. Want maak nie saak hoe vreemd of bisar die situasie is nie, maak nie saak hoe ongemaklik dit gaan wees om in Eric se huis te kom en sy vrou te ontmoet nie, Jamie gee nie om nie.

Haar gevoelens vir Clay Michaels is sterker.

Eric het die laaste vyf minute vyf keer deur die venster gekyk. Elke keer wanneer hy gaan stilstaan, raak hy bewus van sy swaar hartklop. Hulle gaan nou enige oomblik hier wees, Clay en Jamie en Sierra.

Dit maak vir hom sin dat sy hart so onstuimig klop. Dit voel na ’n onmoontlikheid. Om te dink Clay het New York toe gegaan en Jamie Bryan daar ontmoet? Die vrou wat hy in daardie verskriklike dae ná 11 September leer liefkry het? Die vrou wat hy met soveel moeite uit sy gedagtes geweier het?

Daar was geen onsekerheid in Clay se stem toe hy gebel het nie. Hy weet wat hy vir Jamie voel. Ja, sy was aanvanklik ontsteld oor die feit dat hulle twee broers is. Nes Eric self, was sy nie van plan om hom weer te sien nie. Maar sy het die saak klaarblyklik op die een of ander manier vir haarself uitgemaak, want sy het saam met Sierra Los Angeles toe gevlieg en gaan nou enige oomblik hier wees.

Jamie Bryan – hierdie keer in sy wêreld.

Toe hulle mekaar laas gesien het, was daar ’n emosionele intimiteit tussen hulle wat vir getroude pare bestem is. En waarom nie? Albei van hulle het vir meer as twee maande geglo dat hulle getroud was. En wat van Sierra?

Dit het hom gebreek om vir haar totsiens te sê. Hy onthou steeds sy laaste oggend saam met haar. Hy moes sy trane inhou terwyl hy haar hare ingedraai het en sy oor haar maatjie gebabbel het. Katy, dink hy. En hoe lekker dit was dat Mamma saam met hulle kerk toe gaan. En hy het vir haar gesê dat Mamma dalk die volgende week haar hare moet indraai, dat Mamma dit nog beter as hy kan doen.

Eric skuif die herinneringe opsy en kyk deur die venster of Clay se Jeep al aankom.

Hulle het die nodigste vir Josh vertel, dat sy oom Clay die vrou ontmoet het by wie Eric gebly het. Hulle het Josh voorheen al van Eric se tyd in New York vertel. Maar nou die dag se neutrale kyk op Josh se gesig het verklap dat die elfjarige seun steeds nog nie heeltemal verstaan nie. Hy blyk tevrede te wees dat sy ouers gelukkig is; niks anders maak saak nie.

Laura en Josh is albei bo besig om gereed te maak.

’n Motor draai by hulle straat in, maar dis te klein vir Clay se Jeep. Eric moet hulle self by die oprit sien indraai. Want as hy dit nie met sy eie oë sien nie, sal hy dit nie glo nie. Gaan Jamie Bryan werklik nou oor sy drumpel loop? En nie net Jamie nie, maar Sierra ook. Liefste klein Sierra, die klein dogtertjie wat sy hart gesteel het die oomblik toe hy in die New Yorkse hospitaal met

geheueverlies wakker geword het.

Sy sal nou ... hoe oud wees? Minstens sewe.

Die herinneringe eb en vloei en word soos 'n paar laaste herfsblare opgewaai.

Is dit drie jaar sedert hulle laaste totsiens? Hy kan alles weer voor hom sien afspeel, elke emosie voel wat hy daardie dag gehad het. Hoe hy Sierra in die voorportaal omhels het, ure voor sy vlug Los Angeles toe. Hy en Jamie het ingestem om met die fasade voort te gaan en te maak asof hy haar pa was. Sy was te klein om te verstaan. Daarom het hy haar daardie oggend soos op enige ander gegroet. Hy het haar hare ingedraai en belowe om daardie aand saam met haar perdjie te speel wanneer hy terugkom.

Maar hy het nooit teruggekom nie. Want teen daardie tyd het hy uitgevind wie hy is en waar hy hoort. Twee ure later het hy Jamie in die LaGuardia-lughawe gegroet en vir oulaas vasgehou. Dankie gesê dat sy hom gehelp het om sy pad huis toe te vind. Hulle het tot op die laaste oomblik hande vasgehou toe Laura saam met 'n stroom passasiers by die aankomssaal uitgekom het.

Hy dink weer aan wat hy 'n paar weke gelede vir Clay gesê het. Sy fisiese genesing en die ommekeer in sy lewe was maar net 'n deel van die wonderwerk. Die ander deel was dat hy daarin kon slaag om Jamie agter te laat.

Hy voel iemand agter hom en draai om. "Laura."

Daar is 'n seergemaakte uitdrukking op haar gesig. "Moet jy hier staan en wag?" Haar stem is sag, verslane. "Dis nog net 'n paar minute, dan is sy hier."

"Hei." Hy staan weg van die venster en draai na haar. Sy stem is sag, warm.

"Laura ... moenie so wees nie. Dis nie my skuld nie."

"Dis niemand se skuld nie. Dis juis die ding." Sy slaan haar arms styf om haar lyf. "Maar dit verander niks aan hoe ek voel nie."

Hy streel oor haar voorkop. "Hoe voel jy?"

"Bang." Haar antwoord is vinnig, nadruklik. "Partykeer so bang ek kan sterf."

"Aaa, Laura ..." Sy hart gaan na haar toe uit. Natuurlik is sy angstig. Die hele situasie is absurd. Hy vee 'n string blonde hare uit haar gesig en raak met sy lippe aan hare. "Clay het 'n vrou ontmoet en verlief geraak. Die vrou is toevallig Jamie Bryan. Dit het niks met my en jou te doen nie, oukei? Moenie bang wees nie."

"Ek probeer om nie te wees nie, Eric." Sy kyk tot in sy hart. "Jy het drie maande lank by haar gebly. Ek bly dink ..." Sy aarsel en lig haar hande op. "Ek weet nie. Ek bly dink dat jy op haar verlief geraak het." Haar oë lyk weer verslae. "Ek dink aan hoeveel tyd jy saam met 'n ander vrou deurgebring het, en ek kan nie help om te wonder hoe dit was nie. Nie net die fisiese goed nie, maar die emosionele band."

Die pyn in haar oë ruk aan sy hart. Dis 'n pad wat hulle nooit geloop het nie, een wat hom terugneem in tyd na Jamie Bryan toe. Hy was van die begin af eerlik met haar, maar nadat hy die besonderhede met haar gedeel het, het hy hulle in 'n plek gaan wegsluit waarheen hy nooit weer sou gaan nie. Wanneer Laura in die verlede haar twyfel oor daardie tyd in sy lewe uitgespreek het,

het hy dit vinnig afgemaak.

Maar nou ...

“Laura.” Hy plaas sy hande op haar skouers. “Ek het niks van jou weerhou nie. Ja ... ” Hy sluk en bid dat sy hom sal glo. Dankbaar dat dit die waarheid is. “Ons het ’n paar maal gesoen, maar niks meer nie. Nie een van ons wou intiem wees voordat ek my geheue teruggehad het nie.”

“Maar jy moes haar liefgehad het, Eric. Of ten minste gevoel het dat jy haar liefhet.”

Dis die moeilike deel. Wat is liefde? Eric leun teen die vensterraam. “Ek het gedink ek was haar man; ek het myself toegelaat om te *glo* dat ek vir haar lief was.” Hy laat sak sy kop en vryf oor sy nekspiere. Toe hy opkyk, blaas hy sy asem uit. “Ek het gedink dit was die regte ding, Laura. Wat dit ook al was, God het dit ten goede laat meewerk. Teen hierdie tyd weet jy hoe ek voel. Ek is van Jamie af weg en het nie beplan om ooit weer terug te kyk nie.”

Sy kyk lank in sy oë. Toe knik sy, steeds nie haarself nie, maar sonder die twyfel van so flussies. “Oukei.” Sy staan op haar tone en soen hom op die wang. “Dalk is dit net ’n erge geval van oggendnaarheid.” Sy blaas die hare van haar voorkop af. “In elk geval, Josh is nog in die stort. Ek moet gaan grimeer.” Sy byt op haar lip. “Ek wil nie hier onder wees wanneer hulle stilhou nie.”

Hy wag totdat sy uit is voordat hy weer omdraai en deur die venster kyk. As die herinneringe maar net nie so helder was nie. Nadat hulle uitgevind het wat sy bloedgroep was, en voordat hy geweet het wie hy was, het Jamie hoeveel maal in sy oë gekyk en gesê hoe sy voel.

Dat sy soms hoop dat hy vir altyd sou bly en nooit weer sy pad huis toe sou vind nie.

Hy trek sy asem skerp in en gaan sit op die vensterbank.

Nadat hy van Jamie afskeid geneem het, het dit al sy inspanning gekos om haar uit sy gedagtes te hou. God het ’n uitweg voorsien. Hy het vir haar begin bid. Dis nie iets waaroor hy met enigiemand buiten die Here gepraat het nie, maar dis die beste wat hy kon doen. Die minste en die meeste.

Hy het daaglik, soms uurlik gebid dat Jamie en Sierra die verlies sou oorleef – eers van Jake, en toe van hom en sy teenwoordigheid in hulle lewe. Dat Jamie in haar nuwe geloof sou groei en op Christus sou steun as dit voel of sy nie nog ’n dag gaan oorleef nie. En dat sy uiteindelik, eendag – as haar hart dit toelaat – iemand anders sal ontmoet en liefkry.

Dis die heel vreemdste. Ná al sy gebede, elke keer dat hy God gevra het om na Jamie te kyk, kan hy steeds nie glo dat dit die antwoord op sy gebede is nie. Sy eie broer? Hy raak hoendervleis. *Here ... u weë is soveel hoër as ons s'n. Help ons asseblief deur hierdie dag. Gee vir ons almal rustigheid. Ter wille van Clay ... en Jamie.*

*Wees stil ... en weet Ek is God.*

Wat? Eric staan op. Hy leun teen die vensterraam en maak sy oë toe. Die antwoord was so vinnig, so duidelik. Soms wanneer hy bid, het hy ’n gevoel,

'n wete van dit wat die Here van hom wil hê. Maar hierdie keer ...

Die antwoord was hoorbaar. Dalk nie soos die meeste mense dit sou hoor nie. Maar iewers in sy binneste weet Eric dat hy die woorde gehóór het. *Wees stil en weet Ek is God.* Dis 'n vers wat hy destyds in Jake se Bybel raakgelees het. Gedurende sy geheueverlies moes Eric leer dat hy God nie kon aanjaag of homself kon forseer om te onthou nie. Hy moes stil wees en toelaat dat God die werk doen.

Nou druk God hom dit weer op die hart. Wees stil en wag; en weet dat God in beheer is, wat ook al gebeur.

Sy mond is droog en sy hart swaar onder die gewig van sy herinneringe. Hy gaan kombuis toe, skakel die ketel aan en haal 'n beker uit die kas. 'n Koppie koffie sal hom help om van die spinnerakke ontslae te raak. Na 'n paar minute kook die water en toe hy dit in sy beker skink, hoor hy 'n klop aan die deur en dan hoe dit oopgemaak word.

"Eric?" Clay se opgewekte stem klink nie geforseerd nie, maar dis ook nie heeltemal natuurlik nie.

Geen wonder nie. Nes die res van hulle, kan Clay nie anders as om die onderliggende spanning aan te voel nie. "Ek kom." Hy los sy koffie op die toonbank en gaan na die portaal toe.

Clay is nog in die deur. "Jamie het net gou iets in die kar gaan haal." Hy kom in.

Sierra is net agter hom. 'n Langer, ouer weergawe van Sierra.

Sy sien hom en daar is 'n opflikking van herkenning. "Haai, oom Eric." Haar kennetjie bly op haar bors, haar oë skaam en skrikkerig.

Daar is 'n knop in Eric se keel en hy kan nie praat nie. Sy is anders, nie meer dieselfde kleinding wat sy as vierjarige was nie. Hierdie Sierra is meer volwasse, en sy weet wat hartseer is. Hy hou sy arms na haar toe uit. "Haai, Sierra."

Sy kom met stadige, onseker treë nader en gee hom 'n drukkies. Toe kyk sy in sy oë en glimlag. "My mamma het vir my vertel van die tyd toe jy by ons gebly het." Haar oë versag en daar is 'n sweem van die Sierra wat hy so maklik as sy eie dogtertjie kon liefkry. "Ek verstaan nou."

"Sierra verstaan baie." Clay staan 'n paar treë weg, en daar is 'n klammigheid in sy oë.

Sierra verhelder toe sy Clay se stem hoor en huppel tot by hom en neem sy hand. Skielik is sy net 'n langer weergawe van die dogtertjie wat Eric geken het. "Ons sal hulle van Wrinkles en die narrehoed moet vertel, oukei?"

Eric knip sy oë. Wat is dit? Sierra onthou hom skaars, maar Clay ... dis duidelik dat sy gaande is oor hom. 'n Vreemde soort pyn brand in Eric se hart, maar net vir 'n oomblik. Dis waarvoor hy gebid het. Dit moet so wees. Die klein Sierra, die dogtertjie vir wie hy vlindersoentjies gegee het, is vir altyd weg. Sy het immers nooit aan hom behoort nie, maar aan haar pa, Jake Bryan. En dit wil lyk of hierdie nuwe Sierra aan Clay behoort.

Hy hoor voetstappe en dit voel vir Eric asof sy hart gaan staan. Jamie kom in,



en sy lyk presies soos hy haar onthou. Haar oë ontmoet syne. In haar hande is 'n groot bos oranje en geel blomme. Sy aarsel. “Dis vir jou en Laura.” Haar stem is swaar van emosie.

Hy onthou genoeg om te weet dat sy op die rand van trane is. Hy kyk diep in haar oë, na dit wat hulle gedeel het. “Dankie.” Daar is 'n geluid bo in die huis. “Laura gaan nou hier wees.”

“Mooi. Ek wil haar graag ontmoet.”

Eric versit sy gewig. Hy is nie seker wat om te doen nie. Moet hy toegee aan sy behoefte om na haar toe te gaan en te sê dat hy so dankbaar is dat sy die afgelope paar jaar oorleef het? Of moet hy eerder op 'n afstand bly?

Uiteindelik is dit sy wat tot aksie oorgaan. Sy sit die blomme naby die deur neer en in een beweging wis sy die jare tussen hulle uit. Haar arms gaan om sy nek en hy hou haar vas. Dis nie 'n omhelsing wat uit passie gebore is nie, maar uit pyn. 'n Oomblik wat hulle toelaat om alles te sê wat hulle nie kan verwoord nie, alles wat net hulle twee ooit sal verstaan. En vir 'n paar sekondes is hulle die enigste twee mense in die vertrek.

Toe hy terugstaan, is haar oë vol trane. Maar sy maak 'n geluid wat hoofsaaklik 'n laggie is. “Kan jy dit glo?” Sy lag weer en vee haar oë af.

“Nee.” Hy maak keel skoon en probeer sy woorde verby sy emosies uitkry.

“Ek het geweet ek sou dit nie kon glo voordat jy hier staan nie.”

“Ek ook nie.” Sy neem sy hande, gee hulle 'n drukkie en laat hulle gaan. “Dis ongelooflik.”

“Dit is.” Dis toe dat hy dit opmerk. Daar is iets anders aan haar. Iets in haar spontane glimlag, 'n diepte in haar oë. Toe tref dit hom.

Sy het vrede gevind.

In hulle kort tydjie saam het hy haar nooit so gesien nie. In die eerste plek omdat sy so vasberade was om hom te help onthou dat hy Jake was; tweedens, as gevolg van die onsekerhede wat uiteindelik ingekruip het. En laastens omdat sy hom moes help om sy ware identiteit uit te vind. Selfs aan die einde toe sy Christus aangeneem het en sterk genoeg was om hom te laat gaan, selfs toe sy hom by LaGuardia gegroet het, het sy nie hierdie vrede gehad nie. Nie soos nou nie.

Hy glimlag vir haar. Hoe vreemd dit ook al is, daar is iets reg aan hierdie herontmoeting. Hy kan dit voel.

Die oomblik is verby. Gister se herinneringe vervaag. Eric gee nog 'n tree terug en voel hoe hy na die hede teruggebring word. Die hele tussenspel met Jamie het net 'n paar oomblikke geduur en nou wend hy hom tot Clay. “Kleinboet. Bly jy is hier.” Hy skud Clay se hand en glimlag. “Jy weet hoe Laura kan kos maak.”

“Oukei, ek het my naam gehoor.” Laura staan aan die bopunt van die trap en Josh is agter haar. Haar stem klink net so opgeruimd en sonnig soos sy lyk. Die onsekerheid en vrees is weg uit haar oë. In die plek daarvan is 'n selfvertroue wat Eric dankbaar maak. Selfvertroue en opgeruimdheid en 'n onderliggende vasberadenheid om nie vandag die slagoffer te speel nie.

Sy lyk op haar gemak toe sy afkom en vir Clay 'n drukkies gee. Dan glimlag sy beurtelings vir Sierra en Jamie. "Ek's Laura." Sy plaas haar hand op Jamie se skouer. "Ek's bly julle kon kom."

Wat Laura ook al in hulle kamer gedoen het, het meer as net grimering behels. Hierdie soort ommekeer kan net beteken dat sy die meeste van die tyd op haar knieë was. Eric se liefde vir haar word net groter. *Jy doen goed, Laura. Mooi so, liefste.*

Jamie tel die blomme op en gee dit vir haar. "Dis vir jou." Sy glimlag warm vir Laura. "Dankie dat julle ons so welkom laat voel."

Daar is 'n ewe opregte glimlag op Laura se gesig toe sy praat. "Lyk my die Here het ons bymekaar uitgebring om vriende te wees."

"Ja." Daar is weer trane in Jamie se oë. "Ek dink ook so."

Laura draai na Josh. "Dis Josh, hy is elf."

"Haai." Jamie skud sy hand. "Julle het 'n lekker huis." Sy glimlag vir Clay en neem Sierra se hand. "En dis Sierra."

Laura plaas haar hande op haar knieë en buk vooroor. "Sierra. Wat 'n mooi naam." Sy hou haar kop skeef. "Ek's so bly jy het gekom."

Sierra gaan staan weer langs Clay. "Dankie."

Eric kan nie anders as om te straal nie. Hy kyk na Clay en Sierra, Jamie en Laura en Josh en skielik kyk Laura talmend na hom. Haar oë skitter en daar is iets in haar glimlag. Sy gee nie voor nie. Laura is oukei. Ondanks al die kommer kan hy sien dat daar 'n groot rustigheid by haar is.

By almal van hulle.

# Chapter TWENTY-SIX

He was still the mirror image of Jake.

From the moment she walked through Eric Michaels's door, that was what surprised Jamie most of all. She had expected him to look different, as if maybe now that his injuries were completely healed, now that his burns had faded from his face and arms, he would have his own look.

An Eric Michaels look.

But the resemblance between him and Jake was uncanny, amazing. Same face and build, same dark hair and blue eyes. When she walked through the door and saw him, it was all she could do to keep from gasping. She had wanted to run to Clay, take his hand, and lean on him for support, but she had to deal with the man standing before her.

Seeing Eric was like seeing a ghost.

Within her, though, she felt God at work, felt Him leading her through the moment, giving her perspective, and reminding her of the truth. Eric wasn't Jake. That truth came quick and served as a lead rope while she blindly walked through those first few minutes.

It wasn't until she met Laura that the swirling emotions in her heart settled. Laura was wonderful. Kind and upbeat, content with the situation in a way that was surprising. Jamie had wondered several times how difficult it must've been for her, how strange she would've felt if the tables were turned. If Jake had disappeared for three months only to resurface a victim of amnesia and having lived with another woman all that time.

But Laura seemed at ease, warm and welcoming. She was pretty, fair skinned with blonde hair and sparkling eyes. Their son, Josh, was a mix between his mother and father. He had her coloring and wider cheekbones rather than Eric's chiseled face. But what struck Jamie the most about him was his easy smile, his comfortable expression. If this boy had been neglected by Eric before September 11, it was impossible to tell now. He was obviously a happy, well-adjusted child. For some reason, that struck a

chord of hope in Jamie.

Because in a very clear way, Josh Michaels's life was different because of what God did through Jake. The words in Jake's journal, and the power of the highlighted sections in Jake's Bible, had changed Eric. In the process, they'd changed Josh too.

It was part of Jake's legacy, really. Seeing that in person was far more powerful than she'd ever imagined.

Despite the dozens of thoughts and memories and observations fighting for position in Jamie's mind, she felt comfortable at the Michaels' home. The morning flew by, and Jamie found the most comfortable place—the spot next to Clay. Clay, not Eric, had captured her heart. She knew that now. Otherwise she never would've been able to sit at a table opposite the man who had lived with her and played the role of her husband, a man who so easily could've been Jake, and want nothing more than to savor every minute with Clay.

"I can't believe this is November." Jamie leaned just enough so that her arm occasionally brushed against Clay's. "It feels like summer."

"Sometimes I wish we had seasons." Laura gripped the arms of her chair and angled her face toward the sun. "But I don't wish it for long." She held her hands out with palms up as if she were weighing something. "Let's see...eight degrees on Thanksgiving Day or eighty degrees...piles of snow and ice or green grass and sunscreen." She grinned at Jamie. "I'll take Southern California."

Eric was inside peeling potatoes. Jamie, Clay, and Laura sat around the backyard patio table, watching the kids toss a Frisbee. Sierra hadn't played with one before, and more than once the plastic disc hit her in the head, but not hard enough to hurt her.

"Clay, guess what?" Sierra giggled in their direction. "I think I need the jester hat. You know why?"

"Why?" Clay leaned forward, his eyes dancing the way they did whenever he and Sierra teased each other. There was no denying how

much he cared for her.

“Cause then the Frisbee would hit the hat instead of my head.”

Clay chuckled. “Or maybe a helmet might help.” He stood and jogged out to Sierra’s side. “Here, let me show you how to catch it.” With his hand up in front of his face, he nodded to Josh. “Okay, bucko, show me what you got!”

Grinning, Josh flung it four times as hard as before. “Take that!”

The phone rang, and Eric must’ve answered it in the house. He came to the door, opened the screen, and handed it to Laura. “It’s Gina.” His eyes caught Jamie’s for a minute, and he gave her a hesitant smile, checking, maybe, to see if she and Laura were still hitting it off.

Jamie gave him a knowing look. Yes, she was fine. Laura was easy to be around. Eric looked out at the yard. “Way to throw it, Josh. Uncle Clay won’t last; he wears down easy.” Eric winked at his brother. “Hey, Clay, if he wears you out come join me in the kitchen.” Then he turned, shut the door, and disappeared into the house.

Jamie sat back in her chair. Laura’s conversation seemed deep, as if maybe the Gina woman, whoever she was, had troubling news. Clay was caught up in what had now become Frisbee golf. Jamie stood and stretched, then went to the edge of the patio and called out to Clay. “I’m going to make some tea. Want some?”

“No, thanks.” He grinned at her. “Tell Eric I’m beating his son.”

She laughed and raised her eyebrows in Laura’s direction. *Tea?* she mouthed the word.

Laura covered the phone again. “No, thanks.” Her words were barely a whisper. “My friend’s son is in the hospital.” She frowned. “Sorry about this.”

Jamie gestured that it didn’t matter; Laura could take as long as she liked. Then she went inside and when the kitchen came into view she stopped. Eric was working over the pot of potatoes, and from the back...

She gritted her teeth and kept walking. He wasn’t Jake. She drew a

quick breath. “Clay says to tell you he’s beating your son.”

Eric turned around. “Is that right?” He nodded to the pot, his eyes brimming with laughter. “I’m almost done, and then we’ll see who wins at Frisbee golf.”

She took the teakettle from the stove, careful not to brush against him or get in his way. “Want some tea?” She filled it with water, brought it back, and set it on the burner next to the potatoes.

“No, thanks.” He was peeling the last one, cutting it into chunks, and dropping it into the pot. He turned the burner on to the highest level and put the lid on; then he did the same for the adjacent burner, the one with the teakettle.

They were suddenly out of busy things to do.

She leaned against the kitchen island and he stood opposite her, a few feet away. “You doing okay?”

Just like that he could still speak to the deepest part of her. “Yes.” Her eyes held his and for a moment neither of them spoke. “Thanks for not pretending.”

“Not pretending?” He narrowed his eyes, seeing straight to her soul.

“That we were strangers, that we never...”

“Never had that time together?” His tone was soft, understanding.

“Yes.” She looked at the floor and then back up at him. “Thanks for that.”

He bit his lip, as though considering whether to say whatever was on his mind or not. “Wanna see something?”

“Okay.” She’d hoped they’d have this, time alone to acknowledge the past and let it find its proper place.

She followed him to a small room off the entryway. “This is my office.” He held open the door and let her go in first. The place was spacious with shelves and cupboards and a countertop that lined one wall. “I do most of my work from home now.”

“Good for you, Eric.” A sad smile tugged at the corners of her lips.

“Jake taught you that.”

“He did.” Eric crossed the room and opened a cupboard at the far end, then looked back at her. “Come here.”

She came closer, and he pulled something off the top shelf that made her heart skitter into a strange rhythm. It was the book she’d made him, the one she’d given him at LaGuardia the day they said good-bye. The cover—faded and weathered from use—read, “In Case You Ever Forget.” Inside were photocopies of key entries from Jake’s journal, special sections of highlighted Scripture that Eric came to love during his time with her and Sierra.

Tears blurred her eyes. With trembling hands she took the book from Eric. “You still have it.”

He looked over her shoulder at it. “I read it all the time.”

She sniffed and turned, lifting her eyes to him. “You still have his mannerisms, his way of helping out and laughing at himself.” A single tear slid onto her cheek and she struggled to find her voice. She stroked her hand along the cover of the handmade book. Then she handed it back to him. “I...I understand things better now.”

He put the book back, closed the cupboard, and rested against the wall. “About us?”

“Mmmhmm.” She dabbed at her cheek and blinked back the tears that stood in line. “God brought us together so we’d both find Him.” She searched his eyes. He understood what she was saying; she still knew him well enough to see that. “You were never supposed to replace Jake.”

“No.” He went to her then and hugged her, letting her know he still cared. Regardless of how right he’d been to go home to Laura, in some way that involved their souls, he still cared about her. “I was never him.”

“Exactly.” She drew back first and crossed her arms. She’d imagined this conversation with Eric, and always she pictured her heart breaking. Instead, all she felt were deep peace and hope because the truth about Eric’s identity was clearer now than it ever had been. She led the way back

to the office door. “Your wife is lovely. You seem very happy. Josh too.”

He fell in step beside her and a glow lit up his eyes. “We are. In fact —” he hesitated—“Laura’s pregnant. Just a couple months.”

Jamie wasn’t sure what to feel. She was excited for Eric and his family, thrilled for them. But oh, how she would’ve liked that for herself and Jake—another child. Something she would never have. She found her smile. “Congratulations.”

“We haven’t told Clay yet. Laura wanted to announce it tonight.”

It was yet another bit of Jake’s legacy, that Eric would come home from New York ready to love his wife and son, able to rebuild what he’d lost over the years to the point that now they were expecting another child. Jamie felt her own desire to have another child easing. Instead her heart sang for Eric and Laura. “I won’t say a word.”

“I know what you’re thinking; that it’s because of what I learned from Jake. What God let me learn. You’re right, Jamie.” He glanced toward the cupboard one more time as they left the room. “What God taught me because of Jake will stay with me forever.” He stopped and looked at her again. “Always. God’s plan in all this is...” He chuckled and raked his fingers through his hair. “Well, it’s more than I can understand.” He paused. “Even now, with you and Clay.”

“Yes.” She felt her cheeks get hot. The way she cared about Eric’s brother was getting stronger every day. And now, alone with Eric, she could hardly wait to get back to Clay. She bit the inside of her lip. “He’s... he’s wonderful.”

“He’s more than that.” Eric stuck his hands in his pockets and gave her a pointed look, his eyebrows raised. “He’s in love with you. I’ve been watching. I’ve never seen my brother like he is with you.”

Butterflies scattered in Jamie’s stomach. “Really?” She felt like a high school girl being told that the guy she had a crush on liked her too. The corners of her mouth lifted. “Me too, Eric. I can’t believe how fast I’m falling.”



“I know; I see it.” He looked deep at her one last time, seeing to the places he’d known back when she was at the lowest point in her life. “I prayed for this, Jamie. That you’d find someone one day.” He chuckled. “Who would’ve thought it would be my very own brother?”

“I know.” Jamie let her head fall back against the hallway wall. “I read something in Jake’s Bible, something I hadn’t caught before.”

“What?”

“It was in Deuteronomy. It talks about God setting before His people life and death, blessings and destruction.” She paused. “Then it says to choose life.” Her eyes were dry now. “Jake wrote something beside it. A note to me. He told me, ‘Jamie, as often as you have the chance, choose life.’”

“And that’s what you’re doing with Clay.” Eric reached out and touched her shoulder. “You couldn’t find a nicer guy than my brother.”

“I know.” She meant it. With her whole heart.

Eric led the way from the room, and when they reached the kitchen, he turned and grinned at her. “I guess that means there’s only one question left.” He chuckled. “How do you feel about California?”

They both laughed as they returned to the kitchen. The kettle was boiling, and they slipped into easy conversation about the gravy and stuffing and the timing of pulling together a Thanksgiving dinner. It felt wonderful, talking this way with Eric, building something new with him, something casual and current. Something they could share without constantly revisiting the past.

Dinner was far more pleasant than Jamie had ever imagined. The tension was gone, and in its place was something new. A friendship that seemed to be setting a stage for the future. Jamie sat between Sierra and Clay, savoring the friendly banter between the two brothers. Clay was like Eric in many ways, but he was his own person, a man whose faith ran deep and true, clearly strengthened by the passing of time.

As for Eric, sitting across from him now at the table, Jamie saw that

something was different about his eyes. He looked so much like Jake, she'd missed it at first, but now that she had time to watch him, to study him while he interacted with Clay and Laura and the rest of them, she could see it clearly.

He didn't have Jake's eyes.

Oh, they looked like Jake's at a glance. But deep within them were memories and emotions that were Eric's alone. Memories he hadn't had when he was living with her in Staten Island. She took a bite of fruit salad and felt herself relax even more.

"This is good turkey, Mrs. Michaels." Sierra beamed at Laura. "Maybe the bestest ever."

"Thank you, Sierra." Laura cast a quick smile at Eric. "I had help with it."

Jamie let her eyes rest on her daughter. Sierra was in her element. She was a people person, someone who loved being around big families. No wonder she was ready to have a second daddy, as she called it. The past three years had been little more than a healing time, a time to say good-bye to Jake and figure out a way to face the future without him.

Watching her, Jamie was convinced. Sierra, too, was ready to choose life.

They went around the table then, telling what they were thankful for. Josh was thankful for his family; Sierra, for her new friends; and Laura, for the chance to be together. Clay looked at Jamie when he gave his answer. "I'm thankful for God's gift of new life." Under the table, he took hold of her fingers for a few seconds. "Not just once, but every day."

Eric looked around the room at each of them and gave a slow nod. "I'm thankful for answered prayers."

It was Jamie's turn. She massaged her throat, working out the lumps that had sprung up in the last minute or so. Then she looked at Clay and said, "I'm thankful God allows us the chance to choose life."

"On that note—" Eric leaned close to Laura, his eyes on hers—"we

have an announcement to make.”

Laura looked at Josh and then Clay. “We’re going to have a baby!” Her face glowed.

“Seriously?” Clay was on his feet.

“Seriously.” Eric laughed. “I know. I can’t believe it myself.”

Clay walked around the table and gave Eric a hearty hug, slapping him hard on the back. “I’m so happy for you.” He held on for a few seconds and then he hugged Laura. “Congratulations.” On the way back to his seat he gave Josh a light punch in the arm. “You’re going to be a big brother, eh, Josh?”

“I guess.” He flashed a lopsided grin at his parents. “I just found out this morning. It’s kinda hard to believe.”

Jamie leaned forward. “Congratulations, guys. That’s wonderful.”

Sierra wanted to know if Laura was having a girl baby or a boy baby, and Laura tried to explain that it was too soon to tell.

The conversation took wing, shifting from the idea of a little one running around the house to Josh’s basketball abilities to Sierra’s make-believe dress-up games and the meaning of the jester hat.

When they hit a lull, Eric held up his finger. “Wait!” He wiped his mouth with a napkin and uttered a quiet laugh. Then he looked at Laura. “Can I tell them about your run-in with the law?”

“What?” Clay’s eyes got wide. “Laura Michaels had a run-in with the law? I’ve got to hear this.”

“Sort of.” Laura gave Jamie a weak smile, and then lifted her shoulders in Eric’s direction. “Ah, go ahead and tell it.”

Eric was immediately in his element, explaining how Laura had to go to the mall before Josh’s basketball game, and on the way home she was in a big hurry. “Apparently she’d missed the on-ramp for the freeway and tried to make a sweeping U-turn across six lanes of traffic.” He laughed and patted her hand. “But she still didn’t have a bead on the on-ramp, so she straightened out and wound up in oncoming traffic. That’s when she heard

the siren.”

“I was scared to death.” She looked at Jamie for sympathy. “They changed that whole intersection. It’s impossible to figure out which lane gets on to the freeway.”

Jaime nodded, trying to look earnest, but wanting to laugh out loud.

“So then—“ Eric winked at his wife—“when the officer pulls up behind her, she parks with her two right tires way up on the curb.

Laura raised her brow, her eyes dancing. “I wanted to stay out of traffic.”

“So the officer comes up to the window, taps on it, and tells her, ‘Ma’am, I have several concerns.’”

“Yes,” Laura nodded. “That’s right. Several.”

Everyone was laughing now. Eric waited until he caught his breath to continue. “The officer was so flustered he didn’t know what to do.” Eric anchored his elbows on the table, his laughter getting the better of him. “So they call for backup and give her a sobriety test. My Laura, standing there near the Thousand Oaks Mall exit to the Ventura Freeway, getting a sobriety test.” He grabbed at his sides, still laughing. “‘The amazing thing is,’ the officer told her, ‘you really haven’t been drinking.’”

The kids were smiling at each other and shrugging their shoulders. Josh was busy helping Sierra butter her dinner roll.

Clay stopped laughing long enough to turn to Laura. “So what’d they get you for?”

She shrugged. “Nothing. Isn’t that great?” She smiled at them, triumphant. “After I passed the test, he told me to buy a map and be more careful.”

“Glad it wasn’t me.” Clay leaned back in his chair and took a long breath. His eyes were damp from laughing so hard. “I would’ve ticketed you for sure.”

“Why?” Laura was indignant. “For parking on the curb?”

“Nope.” Clay exhaled long and loud. “For impersonating a drunk

driver.”

The laughter continued throughout the meal, but even as they chatted, Jamie kept glancing at Clay, sensing his nearness to her and thinking about Eric’s question, the one that had been on her own heart for the last week or so. Especially during the days when she and Clay had been apart. It was a question that might have to be answered one of these days, so as they finished dinner and cut into dessert, as they continued talking over coffee and finally as Clay helped them gather their things and head for the car, Jamie let it play again and again in her mind.

How *did* she feel about California?

## Ses-en-twintig

Hy is steeds Jake se ewebeeld.

Dis wat Jamie die meeste verras toe sy Eric Michaels die eerste keer sien. Sy het gedink hy gaan anders lyk, asof hy, noudat sy gesig en arms sonder letsels is, sy eie voorkoms sou hê. Dié van Eric Michaels.

Maar die ooreenkoms tussen hom en Jake is buitengewoon ongelooflik. Dieselfde gesig en bou, dieselfde donker hare en blou oë. Toe sy by die deur inkom en hom sien, het sy amper na haar asem gesnak. Sy wou na Clay toe vlug, sy hand neem en aan hom vashou vir ondersteuning, maar sy moes haar aandag aan die man voor haar gee.

Dit was soos om ’n spook te sien.

In haar binneste kon sy egter voel hoe die Here werk. Hoe Hy haar deur die oomblik lei en haar perspektief gee, haar aan die waarheid herinner. Eric is nie Jake nie. Die besef was amper onmiddellik daar en het as ’n soort leiband gedien terwyl sy blindelings deur daardie eerste paar minute moes kom.

Dit was eers toe sy Laura ontmoet het dat haar onstuimige emosies tot rus gekom het. Laura is wonderlik. Innemend, opgeruimd en met ’n verrassende kalmte oor die hele situasie. Jamie het al verskeie kere gewonder hoe moeilik dit vir Laura moes wees, hoe vreemd sy sou voel as die bordjies verhang was. As Jake vir drie maande verdwyn het, net om sy verskyning as ’n slagoffer van geheueverlies te maak, en dít nadat hy daardie hele tyd by ’n ander vrou gebly het.

Maar Laura lyk op haar gemak. Sy is ’n mooi vrou met ’n ligte vel, blonde hare en sprankelende oë. Hulle seun, Josh, is ’n kombinasie van sy ma en pa. Hy het haar gelaatskleur en sy gesig is breër as Eric s’n. Maar wat Jamie die diepste tref, is sy spontane glimlag en sy gemoedelikheid. As die seun voor 11

September deur Eric verwaarloos is, kan 'n mens dit vandag glad nie sien nie. Hy is duidelik 'n gelukkige, goed aangepaste kind. Om die een of ander rede laat dit 'n sprankie hoop in Jamie opvlam.

Want Josh Michaels se lewe het op 'n baie sigbare manier verander as gevolg van dit wat die Here deur Jake gedoen het. Die woorde in Jake se dagboek en die krag van die onderstreepte gedeeltes in sy Bybel het 'n verandering in Eric bewerk, en in die proses is Josh ook verander.

Dis eintlik deel van Jake se nalatenskap. Om dit met haar eie oë te sien, is baie kragtiger as wat sy ooit kon droom.

Ondanks die magdom gedagtes en herinneringe en waarnemings wat om Jamie se aandag wedywer, voel sy op haar gemak in die Michaels-huis. Die oggend vlieg verby en Jamie ontdek waar sy die heel gemaklikste voel – langs Clay. Haar hart behoort aan Clay, nie aan Eric nie. Sy weet dit nou. Andersins sou sy onmoontlik aan tafel oorkant die man kon sit wat by haar gebly het en die rol van haar man gespeel het, 'n man wat baie maklik Jake kon wees. Al wat sy wil doen, is om elke oomblik saam met Clay te koester.

“Ek kan nie glo dis November by julle nie.” Jamie sit so dat haar arm elke nou en dan aan Clay s'n raak. “Dit voel soos somer.”

“Soms wens ek ons het seisoene gehad.” Laura laat sak haar hande op haar stoel se armleunings en draai haar gesig na die son. “Maar ek wens dit nie vir lank nie.” Sy lig haar hande met palms na bo asof sy iets weeg. “Kom ons kyk ... minus tien grade of vyf-en-twintig grade op Thanksgiving ... hope sneeu en ys of groen gras en sonbrandolie.” Sy glimlag vir Jamie. “Ek dink ek kies Kalifornië.”

Eric is in die huis besig om aartappels te skil. Jamie, Clay en Laura sit by die stoep tafel en kyk hoe die kinders met 'n frisbee speel. Dis Sierra se eerste keer, en die plastiekskyf tref haar meer as een maal teen die kop, maar nie hard genoeg om haar seer te maak nie.

“Oom Clay, raai wat?” Sierra giggel in hulle rigting. “Ek dink ek het Oom se narrehoed nodig. Weet Oom hoekom?”

“Hoekom?” Clay leun vooroor en sy oë dans soos altyd wanneer hy en Sierra mekaar terg. Enigiemand kan sien hoeveel hy vir haar omgee.

“Want dan sal die frisbee die hoed tref in plaas van my kop.”

Clay gee 'n laggie. “'n Veiligheidshelm sal dalk nog beter wees.” Hy staan op en draf na Sierra toe. “Hierso, kom ek wys jou hoe 'n mens 'n frisbee vang.” Hy hou sy hand gereed en knik vir Josh. “Ek's reg, grootman, wys my wat jy het!”

Josh grinnik en gooi die skyf met vier keer meer krag as vir Sierra. “Vat so!”

Die telefoon lui en oomblikke later maak Eric die deur oop en hou dit na Laura toe uit. “Dis Gina.” Sy oë vang Jamie s'n vir 'n oomblik en hy glimlag onseker, dalk om seker te maak dat sy en Laura steeds gemaklik kuier.

Jamie wys met haar oë dat sy verstaan. Sy is oukei. Laura is iemand wat 'n mens op jou gemak laat voel. Eric kyk uit na die tuin. “Mooi so, Josh. Oom Clay gaan nie lank hou nie; hy raak gou moeg.” Eric knipoog vir sy broer.

“Clay, as hy jou klaar uitgeput het, kan jy my in die kombuis kom help.” Toe draai hy om, maak die deur toe en verdwyn in die huis.

Jamie sit agteroor op haar stoel. Laura is diep in gesprek en dit klink asof haar vriendin dalk met slegte nuus gebel het. Clay en Josh is nou in ’n moordende frisbee-kragmeting gewikkel. Jamie staan op, strek haar uit, gaan staan op die rand van die stoep en roep vir Clay. “Ek gaan tee maak. Wil jy ook hê?”

“Nee, dankie.” Hy glimlag vir haar. “Sê vir Eric ek’s besig om sy seun uit te stof.”

Sy lag en lig haar wenkbroue in Laura se rigting. *Tee?* Sy vorm die woord met haar mond.

Laura hou haar hand oor die telefoon. “Nee, dankie.” Haar woorde is skaars ’n fluistering. “My vriendin se seun is in die hospitaal.” Sy frons. “Jammer hieroor.”

Jamie wys dat dit nie saak maak nie; Laura kan haar tyd neem. Sy gaan binnetoe en toe sy by die kombuis kom, steek sy vas. Eric is by die stoof besig en van agter af ...

Sy byt op haar tande en begin weer loop. Hy is nie Jake nie. Sy haal diep asem. “Clay sê hy’s besig om jou seun te wen.”

Eric draai om. “Is dit so?” Hy knik na die kastrol, sy oë vol lag. “Ek’s amper klaar en dan sal ons sien wie regtig weet hoe om ’n frisbee gooi.”

Sy haal die teepot van die stoof af en maak seker dat sy nie per ongeluk aan hom raak of in sy pad is nie. “Wil jy tee hê?” Sy gooi water in en kom sit die pot op die plaat langs die aartappels neer.

“Nee, dankie.” Hy skil die laaste aartappel en sny dit in stukke oor die kastrol. Nadat hy die deksel opgesit het, stel hy albei stoofplate op hoog.

Daar is skielik niks meer wat hulle hande besig hou nie.

Sy leun teen die toonbank en hy staan ’n paar treë van haar af. “Is jy oukei?”

Hy kan steeds kortpad tot in haar diepste wese praat. “Ja.”

Sy kyk na hom en vir ’n oomblik sê hulle niks nie. “Dankie dat jy nie voorgee nie.”

“Nie voorgee nie?” Hy vernou sy oë en kyk tot in haar hart.

“Dankie dat jy nie maak asof ons vreemdelinge is, dat ons nooit ...”

“Nooit daardie tyd gehad het nie?” Sy stem is vol begrip.

“Ja.” Sy kyk na die vloer en weer op. “Dankie daarvoor.”

Hy byt op sy lip asof hy onseker is of hy sy gedagtes moet uitspreek of nie. “Kan ek jou iets wys?”

“Oukei.” Sy het op so iets gehoop, ’n geleentheid om die nodige erkenning aan die verlede te gee en dit dan ter ruste te lê.

Sy volg hom na ’n vertrek langs die voorportaal. “Dit is my kantoor.” Hy hou die deur oop sodat sy eerste kan ingaan. Dis ’n ruim vertrek met rakke en kaste en ’n ingeboude werkoppervlak langs die een muur. “Ek doen nou die meeste van my werk van die huis af.”

“Dis wonderlik, Eric.” ’n Hartseer glimlag speel om haar mond. “Jy het dit by Jake geleer.”

“Ek het.” Eric maak ’n kas aan die oorkant van die vertrek oop en kyk na haar. “Kom hier.”

Sy kom nader en hy haal iets uit die boonste rak wat haar hart vreemd aan die klop sit. Dis die boek wat sy vir hom gemaak het, die een wat sy by LaGuardia vir hom gegee het toe hulle afskeid geneem het. Die voorblad – nou al dof en verweerd – lees: “Vir ingeval jy ooit vergeet.” Binnekant is daar fotostate van treffende inskrywings uit Jake se dagboek en spesiale onderstreepte Bybelgedeeltes wat Eric gedurende sy tyd by haar en Sierra leer liefkry het.

Haar oë swem in die trane en sy neem die boek met bewende hande by hom. “Jy het dit gehou.”

Hy kyk oor haar skouer daarna. “Ek lees gereeld daaruit.”

Sy snuif en draai na hom. “Jy het steeds sy manier van loop en praat, sy manier om in die kombuis te help en vir homself te lag.” ’n Traan loop oor haar wang en sy sukkel om te praat. Sy streel oor die voorblad van die tuisgemaakte boek. Toe gee sy dit terug. “Ek ... ek verstaan nou beter.”

Hy bêre die boek, maak die kas toe en leun teen die muur. “Jy bedoel ons twee?”

“Mmmhmm.” Sy vee haar wange af en knip haar oë teen die res van haar dreigende trane. “Die Here het ons bymekaar laat kom sodat ons al twee Hom kon ontmoet.” Sy kyk ondersoekend in sy oë. Hy verstaan wat sy sê; sy ken hom steeds goed genoeg om dit te sien. “Jy was nooit veronderstel om Jake se plek in te neem nie.”

“Nee.” Hy kom nader en trek haar teen hom vas, ’n manier om te wys dat hy steeds omgee. Ongeag hóé reg dit van hom was om na Laura toe terug te kom, op ’n besondere manier gee hy steeds vir haar om. “Ek was nooit hy nie.”

“Presies.” Sy laat hom eerste gaan en vou haar arms. Telkens wanneer sy haar hierdie gesprek met Eric voorgestel het, het sy haar hart sien breek. In plaas daarvan ervaar sy ’n diep vrede en hoop omdat die waarheid rondom Eric se identiteit nou soveel helderder as ooit is. Sy begin na die deur toe loop. “Jy het ’n lieflike vrou. Julle lyk baie gelukkig. Josh ook.”

Hy val langs haar in en sy oë verhelder skielik. “Ons is. Trouens ...” hy aarsel, “Laura is swanger. Nog net ’n paar maande.”

Jamie is nie seker wat sy moet voel nie. Sy is opgewonde en bly vir Eric en sy gesin. Maar hoe graag sou sy dit nie vir haar en Jake wou hê nie – nog ’n kind. Iets wat hulle nooit beskore was nie. Sy slaag daarin om te glimlag. “Veels geluk.”

“Ons het nog nie vir Clay gesê nie. Laura wil vanaand die aankondiging maak.”

Ook dit is ’n stukkie van Jake se nalatenskap. Die Eric wat van New York af teruggekom het, was gereed om sy vrou en seun lief te hê en om alles te herwin wat hulle deur die jare verloor het, in só ’n mate dat hulle nog ’n kind verwag. Jamie vergeet van haar eie begeerte na nog ’n kind, en haar hart jubel vir Eric en Laura. “Ek belowe ek sal nie ’n woord sê nie.”



“Ek weet wat jy dink. Dat dit ook deel is van wat ek by Jake geleer het. Wat ek by die Here geleer het. Jy’s reg, Jamie.” Voor hulle uitgaan, kyk hy weer na die kas. “Ek sal nooit vergeet wat die Here my deur Jake geleer het nie.” Hy gaan staan en kyk na haar. “Nooit nie. Die Here se plan met al hierdie dinge is ...” Hy gee ’n laggie en hark sy vingers deur sy hare. “Wel, dis meer as wat ek kan verstaan.” Hy bly stil. “Ook dit wat tussen jou en Clay gebeur het.”

“Ja.” Sy voel hoe haar wange warm word. Haar gevoelens vir Eric se broer raak elke dag sterker. En waar sy nou alleen by Eric is, kan sy nie wag om weer by Clay te wees nie. Sy byt die binnekant van haar lip. “Hy’s ... hy’s wonderlik.”

“Hy’s meer as dit.” Eric steek sy hande in sy sakke en kyk met geligte wenkbroue na haar. “Hy is gaande oor jou. Ek het hom dopgehou. Ek het my broer nog nooit gesien soos hy by jou is nie.”

Daar is skielik ’n hele swerm vlinders in Jamie se maag. “Regtig?” Sy voel soos ’n hoërskoolmeisie wat hoor dat die ou waarop sy verlief is, ook van haar hou. Haar mondhoeke lig. “Ek ook, Eric. Ek kan nie glo hoe vinnig ek besig is om te val nie.”

“Ek weet; ek kan dit sien.” Hy kyk ’n laaste keer diep in haar oë, sien weer die plekke wat hy geken het toe sy op die laagste punt van haar lewe was. “Ek het hiervoor gebid, Jamie. Dat jy eendag iemand sou ontmoet.” Hy gee ’n laggie. “Wie sou kon dink dat dit my eie broer sou wees?”

“Ek weet.” Jamie laat sak haar kop teen die muur. “Ek het iets in Jake se Bybel gelees, iets wat ek nie voorheen opgemerk het nie.”

“Wat?”

“Dit kom uit Deuteronomium. Dit gaan daaroor dat God die lewe en die dood, voorspoed en teenspoed aan sy kinders voorhou.” Sy bly stil. “Dan staan daar dat ons die lewe moet kies.” Haar trane is nou weg. “Jake het iets in die kantlyn geskryf. Vir my. Daar staan: ‘Jamie, wanneer jy die kans kry, kies die lewe.’”

“En dis wat jy met Clay doen.” Eric raak aan haar skouer. “Jy kon nie ’n ouliker man as my broer gekry het nie.”

“Ek weet.” Sy bedoel dit. Met haar hele hart.

Op pad kombuis toe grinnik hy vir haar. “Dit beteken seker daar bly net een vraag oor.” Hy gee ’n laggie. “Hoe voel jy oor Kalifornië?”

Hulle albei lag toe hulle weer in die kombuis is. Die water kook en hulle gesels gemoedelik oor die vleissous en vulsel en die feit dat hierdie Thanksgiving op die perfekte tyd gekom het. Dis wonderlik om so met Eric te gesels, om saam met hom aan iets nuuts te bou, iets informeel en ongekompliseerd. Iets wat hulle kan deel sonder om telkens die verlede te gaan besoek.

Jamie geniet die ete baie meer as wat sy verwag het. Die spanning is weg, en in die plek daarvan het daar iets nuuts gekom. Die begin van ’n vriendskap wat die weg vir die toekoms berei. Jamie sit tussen Sierra en Clay en

verkeukel haar in die twee broers se oor-en-weer-geterg. Clay is in baie opsigte soos Eric, maar hy is 'n mens uit eie reg, 'n man met 'n diep en suiwer geloof wat deur die jare gevorm en versterk is.

Wat Eric betref, waar sy nou oorkant hom aan tafel sit, is daar iets anders aan sy oë. Hy lyk so baie na Jake dat sy dit aanvanklik nie opgemerk het nie. Maar noudat sy die geleentheid het om na hom te kyk, om hom dop te hou terwyl hy met Clay en Laura en die res van hulle gesels, kan sy dit duidelik sien.

Hy het nie Jake se oë nie.

Met die eerste oogopslag lyk dit dalk so. Maar onder die oppervlak skuil daar herinneringe en emosies wat net aan Eric behoort. Herinneringe wat hy nie gehad het toe hy op Staten Island gebly het nie. Sy neem 'n happie van haar vrugteslaai en voel hoe sy 'n bietjie verder ontspan.

“Die kalkoen is baie lekker, tannie Laura.” Sierra kyk stralend na Laura.

“Dalk die lekkerste in die hele wêreld.”

“Dankie, Sierra.” Laura gee Eric 'n vinnige glimlag. “Ek het darem 'n bietjie hulp gehad.”

Jamie se oë rus op haar dogtertjie. Sierra is in haar element. Sy is 'n sosiale mensie en sy geniet hierdie interaksie met 'n ander familie. Geen wonder sy is gereed vir 'n sogenaamde tweede pappa nie. Die afgelope drie jaar was basies maar 'n genesingstyd, 'n tyd om vir Jake totsiens te sê en 'n manier te kry om die toekoms sonder hom in te gaan.

Soos sy nou na haar kyk, is Jamie oortuig daarvan. Sierra is ook gereed om die lewe te kies.

Dan kry elkeen aan tafel 'n beurt om te sê waarvoor hy of sy dankbaar is. Josh is dankbaar vir sy gesin; Sierra vir nuwe vriende; en Laura vir die geleentheid om bymekaar te wees. Clay kyk na Jamie toe hy sy antwoord gee. “Ek’s dankbaar vir die gawe van nuwe lewe.” Onder die tafel neem hy haar hand en hou dit 'n paar sekondes vas. “Nie net een maal nie, maar elke dag.”

Eric kyk na elkeen van hulle en knik stadig. “Ek’s dankbaar vir gebede wat verhoor word.”

Dis Jamie se beurt. Sy vryf oor die lastige knop in haar keel. Toe kyk sy na Clay en sê: “Ek’s dankbaar dat God ons 'n kans gee om die lewe te kies.”

“Op daardie noot ... ” Eric leun oor na Laura en kyk in haar oë, “ ... wil ons graag 'n aankondiging maak.”

Laura kyk na Josh en dan na Clay. “Ons gaan 'n babatjie hê!” Sy straal.

“Ernstig?” Clay is op sy voete.

“Ernstig.” Eric lag. “Ek weet. Ek kan dit self nog nie glo nie.”

Clay loop om die tafel en gee Eric 'n hartlike druk en klop op die rug. “Ek’s so bly vir julle.” Nadat hy sy broer nog 'n oomblik vasgehou het, gee hy vir Laura 'n drukkie. “Veels geluk.” Op pad terug na sy stoel gee hy Josh 'n ligte hou teen die arm. “Nou toe, Josh, lyk my jy gaan ouboet word.”

Hy glimlag skeef vir sy ouers. “Ek het eers vanoggend gehoor. Dis nogal moeilik om te glo.”

Jamie leun vorentoe. “Veels geluk, julle. Dis wonderlik.”

Sierra wil weet of Laura 'n dogtertjebaba of seuntjebaba gaan hê en Laura probeer verduidelik dat dit nog te gou is om te weet.

Hulle gesels oor die idee van 'n nuwe kleinding in die huis, dan oor Josh se basketbaltalente en later oor Sierra se kostuumspeletjies en waar die narrehoed inpas.

Toe dit vir 'n oomblik stil raak, hou Eric sy vinger op. "Wag!" Hy vee sy mond met 'n servet af en lag saggies. Toe kyk hy na Laura. "Kan ek hulle vertel van jou botsing met die gereg?"

"Wat?" Clay se oë word groot. "Het Laura Michaels met die gereg gebots? Ek moet dit hoor."

"Soort van." Laura glimlag flou vir Jamie en lig haar skouers. "Toe wat, vertel maar."

Eric is onmiddellik in sy element. Laura moes blykbaar voor Josh se basketbalwedstryd by die winkels uitkom, en sy moes jaag. "Op pad terug het sy die oprit na die snelweg gemis en probeer om 'n U-draai oor ses bane te maak." Hy lag en gee haar hand 'n drukkie. "Maar my liefste vrou het nog steeds haar bane verkeerd gehad, en toe sy weer sien, het sy voor die aankomende verkeer ingedraai. Dis toe dat sy die sirene hoor."

"Ek was in 'n toestand." Sy kyk na Jamie vir simpatie. "Hulle het die hele kruising verander. Ek weet nie hoe hulle verwag 'n mens moet weet watter baan snelweg toe gaan nie."

Jamie knik en probeer ernstig lyk, maar sy's dik van die lag.

"In elk geval," Eric knipoog vir sy vrou, "toe die verkeerskonstabel agter haar intrek, parkeer sy met albei haar regterwiele bo-op die randsteen."

Laura trek haar wenkbroue op, en haar oë dans. "Ek wou net uit die verkeer kom."

"Die konstabel het toe langs haar motor kom staan, teen die ruit geklop en gesê: 'Mevrou, ek het verskeie klagtes.'"

"Ja," knik Laura. "Dis reg. Verskeie."

Almal lag. Eric wag totdat hy sy asem terugkry voordat hy vervolg. "Die man was só oorbluf dat hy nie geweet het wat om te doen nie." Eric plant sy elmboë op die tafel en word deur 'n volgende lagbui oorval. "Hy het bystand ontbied en haar alkoholvlak getoets. Kan julle glo? Ek kon nie my ore glo toe Laura my bel en sê dat sy voor die Thousand Oaks Mall afgetrek is en vir alkohol getoets word nie." Hy hou sy maag vas soos hy lag. "Wat hom die meeste verbaas, het die konstabel vir haar gesê, is die feit dat sy regtig nie gedrink het nie."

Die kinders glimlag vir mekaar en trek hulle skouers op. Josh is besig om botter op Sierra se broodrolletjie te smeer.

Toe Clay se ergste lag opgehou het, draai hy na Laura. "Wat was jou boete?" Sy haal haar skouers op. "Niks nie. Is dit nie wonderlik nie?" Sy glimlag triomfantlik. "Nadat ek die toets geslaag het, het hy net gesê ek moet 'n padkaart koop en versigtiger wees."

"Jy kan bly wees dit was nie ek nie." Clay sit agteroor en haal diep asem. Sy

oë is tranerig van die baie lag. “Ek sou jou definitief ’n kaartjie gegee het.” “Hoekom?” Laura is verontwaardig. “Omdat ek op die randsteen parkeer het?”

“Nee.” Clay blaas sy asem hard uit. “Vir nabootsing van dronkbestuur.”

Die res van die ete verloop op dieselfde trant, maar deur die geskerts loer Jamie gereeld na Clay, deurentyd bewus van sy nabyheid en van die vraag wat Eric vroeër geopper het. Die vraag wat sy die afgelope week of wat herhaaldelik aan haarself gevra het. Veral in die tyd toe sy en Eric nie bymekaar was nie. Dis ’n vraag wat moontlik baie binnekort beantwoord moet word. Terwyl hulle klaar eet en nagereg geniet, terwyl hulle koffie drink en later, toe Clay help om al hulle goed bymekaar te maak en in die Jeep te laai, laat Jamie die vraag oor en oor in haar gedagtes afspeel.

Hoe voel sy oor Kalifornië?

# Chapter TWENTY-SEVEN

Clay did everything he could to make the minutes last, but on Sunday afternoon he drove Jamie and Sierra back to the Burbank Airport. The trip had been better than either of them had hoped, and even Sierra was sad to leave. They had decided that he would help them in with their luggage and say a quick good-bye.

Their real good-byes were said the night before, in the hallway outside Jamie's hotel room. They'd gone to Disneyland that day, and Sierra had fallen asleep on the way home. Clay carried her up and set her on the nearest bed, and then he and Jamie snuck into the hallway.

For a while they did nothing but look at each other. Clay broke the silence first. "I'm trying to imagine how I'll get through a week without you." They were both leaning against the same wall, a few feet from each other. Clay reached out and took her hand. "What're we going to do?"

Jamie ran her thumb along the side of his hand, her eyes never leaving his. "I could cancel our flight." Her tone was light, half teasing.

"Forever?" He looked back at her hotel door. "Maybe live here for a year or so?"

"Right." She gave him a sad smile. "I had a wonderful time, Clay."

"Me too." He took a step closer. They hadn't kissed once since Jamie had been in California, and Clay was almost glad. She needed to sort through her feelings, figure out how to act around Eric—and how she felt about Clay outside of the routine they'd found on the East Coast.

But now that everything had worked out, now that she was comfortable around Eric, and after a day of holding hands through Disneyland, Clay didn't want to wait another minute. He closed the gap between them and took her into his arms, hugging her the way he'd known he wouldn't get to at the airport. "Jamie," he whispered her name near the side of her face. "I'll miss you so much."

She drew back first, searching his eyes. "When will I see you again?"

"I don't know." He brought his hand up along her cheek and worked his fingers into her hair. "I'll come for Christmas, maybe, how about that?"

Her eyes lit up. "Really, Clay?"

"Yes." He kissed first one cheek, then her other, never breaking eye contact. "If I can wait that long."

"Clay..." She hugged him closer, clinging to his shoulders as if she were desperate to find a way to keep from leaving him. She pressed her cheek against his and suddenly, with an intensity that had been building since she stepped off the plane the day before Thanksgiving, the mood between them changed.

Their lips met, and they kissed. Slowly at first, and then with an intensity that seemed to take both of them by surprise. "Jamie..." He was breathless. "If we spend much more time like this, I know I won't last a month."

"Maybe that's a good thing. That way you'll come to New York sooner." She framed his face with her hands and kissed him in a way that left no doubts about her feelings. When she pulled away, she looked straight to his soul. "God brought us together, don't you think so?"

"Yes." He stroked her hair, memorizing the look in her eyes.

"Then why does it feel like everything's going to change after tomorrow?"

He brought his lips to hers once more. "We'll be three thousand miles apart, but nothing's going to change. Nothing." His breathing was shaky, his body on fire for the way she made him feel. "Christmas is a month away, okay?"

"Okay."

They kissed one last time and then said good-bye.

Clay had been restless all night, dreading the airport scene. He kept telling himself the same thing he'd told her. Christmas was only a month away. But now, as he turned his Jeep into the airport parking lot, December 25 felt like a lifetime away. The three of them were quiet as they walked

into the concourse and Jamie checked her bags with the attendant.

Boarding passes in hand, they found a place near a concession stand where they were out of the flow of traffic. Sierra took the lead. "Bye, Clay." She hugged his waist and gave him a teary smile. "Thanks for a fun time." She glanced at Jamie, and then crooked her finger in his direction. "C'mere. I wanna tell you a secret."

"Okay." He bent down so she could whisper whatever she wanted to say. "What's the secret?"

She cupped her hands over her mouth and pressed them on either side of his ear. "I wish you were my second daddy, Clay. Wouldn't that be great?" She leaned back, her eyes dancing. Then she came in close again. "But don't tell Mommy, 'cause she told me telling you that might make you confused."

Clay's heart soared, but he checked his reaction. Grinning at Jamie, he whispered back at Sierra. "Can I tell you a secret?"

Sierra nodded.

"I wish I were your second daddy too."

Sierra jumped back, her eyes big. "Really?" This time her voice was almost too loud. She clapped her hands and did a little circle dance. Then she hugged him again and her excitement faded as quick as if someone had thrown a bucket of water on her. She crooked her finger at him again, and once more he bent close to her. Her words were slow and sad. "Yeah, only you can't be my second daddy because we don't live in the same place."

He looked at Jamie and she gave him an understanding smile. They had time; if Sierra needed this private conversation with him, he had Jamie's approval. He cupped his hands over her ear and whispered back to her. "Let's pray about that. And maybe one day there won't be so much space between us, okay?"

Sierra took a step back. Her expression was still sad, but a smile played on the corners of her lips. "Okay, Clay." She hugged him one last time. "Good-bye."

He ran his hand along the back of her head. “Good-bye, Sierra.”

She pointed to a drinking fountain a few feet away. “Can I get a sip, Mommy?”

“Sure, sweetie.” Jamie looked at Clay. “I guess this is good-bye.”

“No.” Clay came to her, hugging her, and giving her a brief kiss. “It’s only see ya later.”

Tears formed a shiny layer over her eyes and she nodded. Sierra returned and stood at her side. “See ya later, Clay.”

He watched them go. They went through security and waved one last time before heading down the hallway toward their gate. Only when he got back to his car did he realize how badly he was going to miss her, how much he wanted her in his life. Because that’s when he noticed something that hadn’t happened to him as far back as he could remember.

His cheeks were wet.

## **Sewe-en-twintig**

Clay doen alles in sy vermoë om die tyd uit te koop, maar dis Sondagmiddag en hy en Jamie en Sierra is op pad lughawe toe. Die besoek het hulle albei se hoogste verwagtinge oortref, en selfs Sierra is hartseer dat hulle moet teruggaan. Hulle het besluit dat hy hulle by die lughawe met hulle bagasie sal help en dan vinnig sal groet.

Hulle regte afskeid het die vorige aand plaasgevind, in die gang voor Jamie se hotelkamer. Hulle was Disneyland toe vir die dag en Sierra het op pad terug aan die slaap geraak. Clay het haar na hulle kamer gedra en nadat hy haar op die naaste bed neergesit het, het hy en Jamie by die deur uitgeglim.

Vir ’n paar oomblikke het hulle net na mekaar gekyk. Clay het die stilte verbreek. “Ek probeer dink hoe ek sonder jou deur die week gaan kom.” Hulle het albei teen dieselfde muur geleun, ’n tree of wat van mekaar af. Clay het haar hand in syne geneem. “Wat gaan ons doen?”

Jamie se duim het oor sy hand beweeg, haar oë in syne. “Ek kan altyd ons vlug kanselleer.” Haar stem was lig, halftergend.

“Vir altyd?” Hy het weer na haar hoteldeur gekyk. “Dalk vir ’n jaar of wat hier kom bly?”

“Ai, Clay.” Sy het hartseer geglimlag. “Ek het ’n wonderlike tyd gehad.”

“Ek ook.” Hy het nader aan haar beweeg. Hulle het nog nie een maal gesoen vandat Jamie in Kalifornië was nie, en Clay was amper dankbaar. Sy moes



eers die geleentheid hê om haar gevoelens in oënskou te neem, te sien watter effek Eric op haar het – en uit te vind hoe sy in hierdie nuwe omgewing met sy nuwe roetine oor Clay voel.

Maar noudat alles uitgewerk het, noudat sy gemaklik in Eric se geselskap is, en ná 'n dag van hande vashou in Disneyland, wou Clay nie 'n oomblik langer wag nie. Hy het vorentoe getree en haar teen hom vasgetrek. Hy sou nie op die lughawe die geleentheid hê om haar só vas te hou nie. “Jamie,” het hy naby haar gesig gefluister. “Ek gaan jou so mis.”

Ná 'n paar oomblikke het sy haar kop opgelig en vraend na hom gekyk. “Wanneer gaan ek jou weer sien?”

“Ek weet nie.” Hy het oor haar wang gestreel en sy vingers deur haar hare gestoot. “Ek sal kyk of ek vir Kersfees kan kom. Wat dink jy?”

Haar oë het verhelder. “Regtig, Clay?”

“Ja.” Hy het haar beurtelings op albei wange gesoen sonder om sy oë van hare weg te neem. “As ek so lank kan wag.”

“Clay ... ” Sy het weer naderbeweeg en aan hom vasgehou asof sy desperaat was om 'n manier te kry om nie weg te gaan nie. Sy het haar wang teen syne gedruk en toe, met 'n intensiteit wat sedert haar aankoms die dag voor Thanksgiving opgebou het, het die atmosfeer tussen hulle verander.

Die volgende oomblik het hulle lippe ontmoet. Hulle het mekaar eers aarselend gesoen, en toe met 'n intensiteit wat hulle albei verras het. “Jamie ... ” Hy was uitasem. “As ons baie meer tyd só deurbring, weet ek ek gaan nie 'n maand hou nie.”

“Dalk is dit 'n goeie ding. Dit beteken dat jy gouer New York toe sal kom.”

Sy het sy gesig tussen haar hande gekelk en hom op so 'n manier gesoen wat geen twyfel oor haar gevoelens gelaat het nie. Toe het sy hom laat gaan en tot in sy hart gekyk. “Dink jy ook die Here het ons bymekaar uitgebring?”

“Ja.” Hy het oor haar hare gestreel en die kyk in haar oë in sy geheue laat vasbrand.

“Hoekom voel dit dan asof alles ná môre gaan verander?”

Hy het naby haar mond gepraat. “Ons gaan vyfduisend kilometer van mekaar af wees, maar verder gaan niks verander nie. Niks nie.” Sy asemhaling was onreëlmatig, sy liggaam gloeiend. “Dis net 'n maand voor Kersfees, dan is ons weer bymekaar, oukei?”

“Oukei.”

Hulle het nog 'n laaste keer gesoen en toe totsiens gesê.

Clay het 'n rustelose nag agter die rug. Sy kop was die hele tyd by die gewraakte lughawetoneel. Hy het homself met dieselfde woorde bly troos as vir haar. Dis net 'n maand voor Kersfees. Maar waar hy nou by die lughawe indraai, voel 25 Desember asof dit nooit gaan aanbreek nie. Hulle is stil toe hulle ingaan en Jamie haar en Sierra se bagasie ingee.

Nadat hulle hul instapkaarte ontvang het, gaan staan hulle naby 'n konsessiestalletjie waar dit 'n bietjie stiller is. Dis Sierra wat leiding neem. “Tatta, oom Clay.” Sy slaan haar arms om sy lyf en glimlag tranerig. “Dankie

vir die lekker kuier.” Sy kyk na Jamie en wink hom nader. “Kom gou hier. Ek wil vir Oom ’n geheim vertel.”

“Oukei.” Hy buk sodat sy in sy oor kan fluister. “Vertel my.”

Sy maak haar hande bak om haar mondjie en hou hulle aan weerskante van sy oor. “Ek wens jy was my tweede pappa, oom Clay. Sal dit nie lekker wees nie?” Sy leun terug en haar oë dans. Toe praat sy verder teen sy oor. “Maar moenie vir Mamma sê nie, want sy sê ek gaan jou net deurmekaarmaak as ek sulke goed sê.”

Clay se hart sweef, maar hy hou sy reaksie in toom. Hy grinnik in Jamie se rigting en fluister terug vir Sierra. “Kan ek vir jou ’n geheim vertel?”

Sierra knik.

“Ek wens ook ek was jou tweede pappa.”

Sierra spring terug, haar oë groot. “Rêrig?” Hierdie keer is haar stem amper te hard. Sy klap hande en doen ’n klein sirkeldansie voordat sy hom nog ’n drukkie gee. Maar dan vervaag haar uitgelatenheid asof iemand ’n emmer water op haar omgekeer het. Sy wink hom weer nader en hierdie keer is haar woorde stadig en hartseer. “Maar daar is ’n probleem, want jy kan nie my tweede pappa wees as ons nie op dieselfde plek bly nie.”

Hy kyk na Jamie en sy glimlag begrypend. Hulle het nog tyd; as Sierra hierdie private gesprek met hom wil voer, het hy Jamie se goedkeuring. Hy fluister bakhand by haar oor. “Kom ons bid daaroor. Dalk gaan ons eendag nie so ver van mekaar af bly nie, oukei?”

Sierra staan terug. Haar gesiggie is steeds hartseer, maar sy glimlag vir hom. “Oukei, oom Clay.” Sy gee hom ’n laaste drukkie. “Mooi bly.”

Hy vryf oor haar kop. “Totsiens, Sierra.”

Sy wys na ’n drinkfontejntjie daar naby. “Kan ek gaan water drink, Mamma?”

“Natuurlik, my skat.” Jamie kyk na Clay. “Nou is dit seker totsiens.”

“Nee.” Clay neem haar in sy arms en soen haar lig. “Dis net sien jou later.”

Haar oë raak blink van die trane en sy knik. Sierra het teruggekom en staan langs haar. “Sien jou later, Clay.”

Hy kyk hulle agterna terwyl hulle deur die sekuriteitspunt beweeg. Toe waai hulle ’n laaste keer voordat hulle in die gang verdwyn wat na hulle hek lei. Dis eers toe hy by sy Jeep is dat hy besef hoe baie hy na haar gaan verlang, hoe bitter graag hy haar in sy lewe wil hê. Want hy raak skielik bewus van iets wat hy nie kan onthou al ooit met hom gebeur het nie.

Sy wange is nat.

# Chapter TWENTY-EIGHT

The weeks of December took forever to fall off the calendar.

Jamie continued volunteering at St. Paul's, but only once a week. Twice she worked a shift with Aaron Hisel, but their friendship wasn't what it had once been. At the end of the second shift, he approached her in the break room upstairs and stuffed his hands in his pockets.

"There's someone else, right?" His tone wasn't angry or defensive, but matter-of-fact. "I saw you with him once at the café."

Jamie thought about denying it, but it was impossible. He was right, and more so every day. She ran her tongue along her lower lip and prayed for the right words. "Yes, Aaron. There is."

He looked at the floor near his work boots and gave a slow nod. "I thought so." His eyes found hers again and he shrugged. "I guess it never would've worked anyway. The whole faith thing, you know? We never would've agreed about it." He paused. "I've thought about it, Jamie. I can't believe in God. I'm not ready, not even for you."

Her heart sank. "I'm sorry, Aaron." She touched his shoulder. "I can only tell you what I've told other people here, people who can't get past September 11." She hesitated. "God believes in you, even if you don't believe in Him. He'll keep calling to you the way He's been calling to all of us since the beginning of time. Since Adam and Eve hid from Him in the garden." She let her hand fall to her side. "One of these days, I know you'll hear Him, and then you'll understand. Without Him, nothing makes sense. Nothing at all."

His lips lifted in a crooked smile. "Maybe." He took a step back. His eyes told her he was uncomfortable, ready to end the conversation. "If that ever happens, you'll be the first to know."

"I'll be praying."

She hadn't seen him again after that. The days continued to pass slowly, until even Sierra seemed irritable.

“How many days, Mom?” she asked over dinner one night.

“Twelve. He’ll be here in twelve days.”

She set her fork down and frowned. “That’s too long. Can’t we call him and tell him to come sooner?”

“He works, Sierra. He’s in training.”

“But he could do training here, right, Mommy?”

The conversations were the same every night, and once in a while Jamie let Sierra have a turn on the phone when Clay called. When Jamie took over again, she and Clay talked about their days. Later, when Sierra was in bed, they talked about their feelings, about where things were headed and how they could solve the problem of the distance between them.

Jamie was still thinking about California, but she couldn’t fathom leaving Staten Island. She’d grown up there. It was where she’d played with Jake as a child, where she’d gone to high school and buried her parents after their car accident. It was where she’d gotten married.

Clay wasn’t opposed to moving, but his detective training had just begun. He needed to put in at least a year to finish and get grounded in the job before looking at another department. Once in a while they would agree that maybe the timing was wrong, maybe they were supposed to be good friends, an encouragement to each other and nothing more.

But as soon as she’d imagine that possibility, she’d lay in bed, sick at the thought of being apart from Clay. She could pack her bags tomorrow, couldn’t she? So what if she’d lived all her life on the East Coast? That only meant she was ready for change, right? She would move to the moon to be with Clay, wouldn’t she?

The options were confusing, and since the answers didn’t come easy, she and Clay did their best to stay away from the hard questions.

Finally it was eight days before Christmas. Sierra was in bed, and Jamie was on the phone with Clay, telling him about Sierra, how neither of them could wait until he arrived. His flight was due in on Thursday,

December 23.

“I have an idea.” Clay sounded more upbeat than usual. “Tomorrow’s Saturday. Take Sierra into Manhattan. You haven’t done that yet, right?”

“Not yet.” Jamie flopped onto her bed and considered the idea. “We haven’t had time, really, with Sierra in school.”

“And all the hours on the phone.” Clay chuckled.

Jamie rolled onto her back and stared at the ceiling. “Manhattan, huh?”

“Yes. Do it, Jamie. Spend the day there; you’ll both have a good time.”

By the end of the phone call, Jamie agreed with Clay. A day in Manhattan, shopping on Fifth Avenue and taking in the Christmas lights, would do both her and Sierra good. When she told Sierra the next morning, her daughter jumped up and down. “What a great idea, Mommy. We’ll wear our red gloves and pretty scarves and buy presents for Katy and Mrs. Henning and Clay and everyone we know!”

They set off after breakfast. Snow had fallen a few days before, so the scene was like something from a storybook. Crowded streets, bustling with shoppers looking for the perfect gift before time ran out. They bought Sue Henning a sweater at Bergdorf’s and at FAO Schwartz they found Katy a stuffed Nala—like the one Clay had brought for Sierra.

For Clay, Sierra picked out a pair of woolly socks, so his feet wouldn’t get cold when he was riding around in his police car. Jamie bought him a new Bible—something he’d talked about one of the days they were together in Los Angeles. The store was able to engrave his name on it while Jamie and Sierra had lunch together. She found a few other items before leaving the bookstore.

They were on their way out when Jamie looked at her watch. “Well, sweetie, I think it’s time to head back.”

Sierra looked alarmed. “But, Mommy, we haven’t been in all the stores yet.”

“Honey, we wouldn’t have time for all the stores if we stayed here two days straight.”

“I know but...” Sierra licked her lips. “What time is it?”

Jamie stared at her daughter. Usually by now Sierra would be tired, more than ready to go home. “It’s three o’clock.”

Immediately, Sierra took her hand. “Please, Mommy...please can we stay longer? What about that big store down there with the Christmas tree on top, please?”

“Sierra...” Jamie’s feet hurt. She wanted to play the parent card and call it a day. But maybe Sierra was getting old enough that a day in the city couldn’t last long enough. Maybe it was a sign that she was growing up. She bit her lip and searched Sierra’s face. “It’ll be dark soon.”

Sierra jumped up and down. “That’s right! That’s why I want to stay; so I can see the lights!”

A chill wind passed over them and Jamie pulled her coat tighter. She made a silly face at Sierra and took her hand. “All right, missy. One more store, but that’s it. Then we have to go.”

It was four-thirty by the time they boarded the ferry and headed back to Staten Island. Jamie expected Sierra to be drained, but she was bouncing around the mostly empty ferryboat like a baby chimp.

“How long till we get back?” She did a skip number three feet in either direction of Jamie. “Come on, Mommy, how long?”

Jamie tried to get a bead on her daughter, but she wouldn’t stand still long enough. “Sierra, what’s gotten into you?”

“Happiness, Mommy. Happiness got in me today.”

Jamie blinked at her daughter. She could hardly argue with that problem. “Shouldn’t your happiness be toning down a little?” Jamie had packages stacked around her. Whatever Sierra lacked in exhaustion, she made up for it. The crowds and lights and Christmas music for hours on end had left her ready for bed.

“You didn’t answer me, Mommy. How long till we get back?” Sierra

twirled twice and did an impromptu tap number. “I want to take tap dancing lessons, is that okay? Katy said she’s taking tap in third grade, so I wanna take them too, okay?” She tapped out a little rhythm again.

“Sierra!” Jamie’s voice was half laugh, half exasperation. “Stand still for just a minute.”

Sierra stopped moving. She stared at Jamie, breathless and at attention. “Yes, Mommy. Sorry.”

“Okay.” Jamie breathed out, tired just from watching her daughter. “I’ll answer your first question first. We’ll be back home in twenty minutes; second question, yes. I’ll consider tap dancing lessons.”

Sierra skipped around in a circle. “Goodie! Yes, it’s the bestest day. I’m definitely happy, aren’t you, Mommy?”

Jamie was about to order Sierra to stop again, but she couldn’t. Suddenly looking at Sierra was like looking at the picture of herself. She’d been motionless for long enough, unable to hear the music of life let alone find the rhythm of it. But now she was dancing again. Just like Sierra. Jamie leaned back and smiled at her daughter.

Sierra was merely choosing life.

Fifteen minutes later they were off the ferryboat and in their car, headed home. It was dark by now, but that didn’t stop Sierra. She grew more animated and talkative the closer they got to home. Jamie had long since given up the idea of curbing her enthusiasm. Instead she chuckled to herself and let Sierra carry on, bopping from a request for red hair bands to a curiosity about whether Wrinkles should get dress-up clothes in his stocking this year.

She talked all the way home, until they pulled in the driveway. Then, like a switch had been flipped, she fell silent. It wasn’t until they stepped out of the car and headed up toward the front door that Jamie stopped short and gasped.

In the light from the street lamp, she saw...

It couldn’t be. He wouldn’t have come early and surprised her, would

he? He stood up and her doubts vanished. She dropped her packages and ran to him.

“Clay!”

“I guess I got my dates mixed up.” He grinned and took her into his arms. “Mmmm.” He whispered into her ear. “I missed you.”

“I can’t believe you’re here.” Tears stung her eyes. It was the best surprise she’d had in years. Three years, to be exact. She drew back and raised her eyebrows at Sierra. “Did you know something about this, missy?”

Sierra giggled and clapped her hands. “I didn’t say anything, Clay. I kept the secret.”

Clay pulled back enough to give Sierra a high five. “Way to go!” He winked at her, the wink Jamie had come to love. “I knew I could trust you.”

“You could, Clay. You could trust me a whole lot because I didn’t even say anything about—”

Clay put his hand over her mouth and gave her a gentle pull back to the porch step.

Jamie stood a few feet away. Sierra and Clay were so good together. She put her hands on her hip. “Okay, what’s up?”

Sierra pinched her lips into a straight line and did the zipping motion across them. She tried to speak, but with her words trapped in her mouth, it sounded like gibberish.

Clay put his arm around Sierra and whispered something to her. Then he took something from his coat pocket, something Jamie couldn’t make out. A present of some kind, maybe. He nodded at Sierra, and she did the same.

It must’ve been a signal, because she jumped up and ran to Jamie. “Mommy! Come on.” Sierra grabbed her hand and led her over to Clay. “It’s time.”

Jamie’s heart was thudding hard inside her chest. What was this? Clay



and Sierra had obviously planned this moment. She held her breath. It couldn't be what she was thinking, the thing she couldn't put into words even in her head.

*Not this soon, God. I'm not ready.*

*Daughter, I am with you. I am with you.*

The answer came quick and certain, echoing through her heart and reminding her to exhale. It was okay; God was with her. He was with her and whatever was coming, He was in control. She steadied her legs. "Okay." She forced a short laugh. "How come I'm the only one who doesn't know what's going on?" She stood in front of Clay now, trying to get his attention. The thing he'd taken out of his pocket was hidden under his arms.

Beside her Sierra giggled. She tugged on Jamie's arm. "Quiet, Mommy. Clay wants to ask us something."

Then, as if it were happening in slow motion, Clay pulled a small velvet box from his lap. He stood and came close enough that Jamie could smell his cologne, savor the way it mixed with the fresh soap smell he always had.

She looked at him, searched his eyes. "Clay?" It couldn't be happening, could it? Was she ready? Could she ever be ready?

Sierra bounced up on her toes a few times, but she had her mouth zipped again.

Jamie's head began to spin. She was just barely able to keep focused on Clay and the thing he was doing now. He was getting down on one knee in the crusty snow, his eyes shining, his gaze never leaving hers. And he was opening the box...and there inside was a brilliant white gold solitaire diamond ring.

"Jamie..." Clay searched her eyes, her face. He took the ring from the box, slipping the box back in his pocket. "The more I think about life, the more I'm convinced of one thing." He swallowed and shifted his position so that his other knee was in the snow now. "When you know what to do,

and you know it's the most right thing in the world, then you should do it. Whether it's forgiving someone or loving someone." He stood and took a step toward her, his face intense, serious. "Or asking someone to marry you."

Sierra made a slight squeal.

Jamie heard herself suck in a quick breath, and her fingers came to her mouth. She expected to reel hard one way and then the other, fall to her hands and knees, maybe even faint. It was too soon, right? Wasn't that how she'd been feeling seconds ago?

But now...as she looked from the ring to Clay, she felt strangely centered. The spinning stopped and everything faded except the words he was saying.

"Life's a fragile thing." His expression sobered. "September 11 taught us that." His words were a gentle caress. "For those of us who remain—all of us touched by that day—we need to find strength and hope in Christ, and to do the thing He asks us to do. Choose life."

"Clay..." She felt like a person lost in the forest for weeks on end, a person who was only now seeing clear of the trees. In a single instant, everything she'd fretted about slipped behind her. Now all she saw ahead was a vista wide open and inviting. And if she walked toward it, she'd find a new life, a new home for her and Sierra.

She could see it all.

"Marry me, Jamie." A smile lifted his lips and with his free hand, he framed her face. "Come be my wife in California and start life over again. Trust me that I'll cherish you as long as I live, and that I'll do everything I can to keep God at the center of us." He winked at Sierra. "All of us." He held the ring out to Jamie. "Say yes. Please, Jamie."

She circled her arms around his neck and felt the tears come. "Yes, Clay." The sound she made was half laugh, half cry. He was right; so what if they hadn't known each other for years? They weren't kids out of college, needing to figure each other out. They were adults who belonged

together from the moment they first met; adults with faith at the center of everything, and a connection that rarely came around twice in a lifetime.

He drew back a few inches. Surprise and uncertainty fighting for position in his eyes. “You really will?”

Her head dipped back and she laughed out loud this time. She glanced at Sierra and pulled her into the embrace. Then she looked at Clay again. “Yes, I’ll marry you.”

“And we can move to California, right, Mommy? Because I think it would be the bestest thing to live with Clay *and* be near Disneyland.”

They all laughed, and Jamie realized she had an answer for that question too. One that didn’t feel painful or frightening or rushed because no matter how often she told herself she wasn’t ready, she’d been thinking about it a long time. She locked eyes with Clay and grinned. Good thing his arms were around her, otherwise she would’ve floated away.

“Well?” The uncertainty was gone from his expression.

“Yes.” Jamie said it once and the second time she practically shouted it. “Yes!” She tightened her grip on both Clay and Sierra. “I’ll marry you, Clay, and I’ll move right *into* Disneyland if you want.” Her voice softened and a chill passed down her spine at God’s provision, His perfect timing. “Sierra and I will be wherever you are, Clay. From now on.”

The certainty in her heart was stronger than cement. It was sweet and sure and mingled with the sorrow of good-bye, because after today she would never again live in a memorial. In a little while, she would never again work in one. Her past—beautiful as it was—would simply be her past.

Her yesterdays belonged to Jake Bryan, where they would always belong.

But because of God’s goodness, because He had led her to choose life, her future had a home that was calling to her. And not just her, but Sierra. A future suddenly bright and full and colored with happy expectations. A home together.

And maybe, one day, a home blessed with another child.

She would no longer be Jamie Bryan, except in her distant memories. Because her tomorrows would take her to a place where she had a new name, a name she was breathless to take on—Jamie Michaels.

The most amazing feeling flooded her. *Jamie Michaels*. The sound of it rang across the quiet places of her heart. Clay's touch on her hand made her turn. Through eyes blurred with happy tears, she leaned closer and kissed him. A kiss of joyful excitement over a future that was even now just beginning.

## Agt-en-twintig

Die eerste weke van Desember sleep traag verby.

Jamie gaan voort met haar werk by St. Paul's, maar nou net een maal per week. Sy werk twee maal saam met Aaron Hisel, maar hulle vriendskap is nie meer wat dit eens was nie. Aan die einde van die tweede skof kry hy haar bo in die personeelkamer en druk sy hande in sy sakke.

“Daar is iemand anders, nè?” Hy klink nie kwaad of aanvallend nie. Hy maak bloot 'n stelling. “Ek het jou eendag saam met hom sien koffie drink.”

Jamie wil-wil dit ontken, maar sy durf dit nie doen nie. Hy is reg, en elke dag meer so. Sy lek oor haar onderlip en bid vir die regte woorde. “Ja, Aaron. Daar is.”

Hy kyk na die vloer voor sy werkstewels en knik stadig. “Ek het so gedink.” Hy kyk weer in haar oë en haal sy skouers op. “Dit sou in elk geval nie kon werk nie, dink ek. Die hele geloofskwessie, jy weet? Ons sou nooit daaroor saamgestem het nie.” Hy bly stil. “Ek het daaraan gedink, Jamie. Ek kan nie in God glo nie. Ek's nie gereed nie, nie eens ter wille van jou nie.”

Haar moed sak in haar skoene. “Ek's jammer, Aaron.” Sy raak aan sy skouer. “Ek kan maar net vir jou sê wat ek vir baie ander mense hier gesê het, mense wat nie oor 11 September kan kom nie.” Sy aarsel. “God glo in jou, selfs al glo jy nie in Hom nie. Hy sal na jou bly roep, nes Hy van die heel begin af na ons almal roep. Vandat Adam en Eva in die tuin vir Hom weggekrui het.” Sy laat val haar hand na haar sy. “Ek weet dat jy Hom een van die dae gaan hoor, en dan sal jy verstaan. Sonder Hom maak niks sin nie. Niks nie.”

Hy glimlag skeef. “Dalk.” Hy tree terug. Aan sy oë kan sy sien dat hy ongemaklik is en die gesprek wil beëindig. “As dit ooit gebeur, sal ek jou heel eerste laat weet.”

“Ek sal bid.”

Daarna sien sy hom nie weer nie. Die dae wil maar net nie verbykom nie, en

selfs Sierra raak later geïrriteerd.

“Hoeveel slabies nog, Mamma?” vra sy een aand aan tafel.

“Twaalf. Hy gaan oor twaalf dae hier wees.”

Sy sit haar vurk neer en frons. “Dis nog te lank. Kan ons nie bel en sê hy moet gouer kom nie?”

“Hy werk, Sierra. Hy is in opleiding.”

“Maar hy kan mos hier ook opgelei word, Mamma.”

Dis elke aand se gesprek, en af en toe gee Jamie vir Sierra ’n beurt op die telefoon wanneer Clay bel. Wanneer Jamie weer oorneem, gesels sy en Clay oor wat hulle die dag gedoen het. Later wanneer Sierra in die bed is, gesels hulle oor hulle gevoelens, oor waarheen hulle op pad is en hoe hulle die probleem rondom die afstand tussen hulle gaan oplos.

Jamie tob steeds oor Kalifornië, maar sy kan haar nie indink dat sy van Staten Island moet weggaan nie. Sy het hier grootgeword. Dis waar sy as dogtertjie saam met Jake gespeel het, waar sy op hoërskool was en waar sy haar ouers begrawe het nadat hulle verongeluk het. Dis waar sy getrou het.

Clay is nie daarteen gekant om te trek nie, maar sy speurderopleiding het pas begin. Hy het minstens ’n jaar nodig om die kursus te voltooi en hom in die pos te vestig voordat hy na ’n ander departement kan kyk. Dan en wan sal hulle saamstem dat dit dalk nie die regte tyd is nie, dat hulle dalk veronderstel is om goeie vriende te wees en niks meer nie.

Maar wanneer sy gaan inkruip en oor die moontlikheid nadink, voel sy na by die gedagte om van Clay af weg te wees. Sy kan haar tasse môre pak. Wat maak dit saak dat sy haar hele lewe hier gewoon het? Dit beteken basies net dat sy gereed is vir ’n verandering, of wat? Sy sal op die maan gaan bly om by Clay te wees.

Die opsies is verwarrend en omdat die antwoorde hulle bly ontwyk, doen sy en Clay hulle bes om van die moeilike vrae af weg te bly.

Uiteindelik is dit ’n week voor Kersfees. Sierra is in die bed, en Jamie en Clay praat oor die foon. Sy vertel hom van Sierra en dat hulle nie kan wag vir sy koms nie. Sy vlug is vir Donderdag, die drie-en-twintigste, bespreek.

“Ek het ’n idee.” Hy klink meer opgewek as gewoonlik. “Môre is Saterdag. Hoekom gaan jy en Sierra nie Manhattan toe vir die dag nie? Het jy haar al geneem om na die Kersliggies en versierings te gaan kyk?”

“Nog nie.” Jamie val op die bed neer en speel met die idee. “Met al Sierra se skoolaktiwiteite het ons nog nie tyd gehad nie.”

“Ook nie met al die ure op die telefoon nie.” Clay gee ’n laggie.

Jamie lê op haar rug en staar na die plafon. “Manhattan?”

“Ja. Doen dit, Jamie. Gaan op ’n uitstappie; julle albei sal dit geniet.”

Aan die einde van die gesprek stem Jamie saam met Clay. ’n Dag in Manhattan, inkopies in Fifth Avenue en die duisende Kersfeesliggies gaan haar en Sierra albei goeddoen. Toe sy Sierra die volgende oggend daarvan vertel, spring haar dogtertjie op en af. “Lekker! Ons kan ons rooi handskoene en mooi serpe aantrek en vir Katy en tannie Sue en Clay en almal presente

koop!”

Hulle vertrek net na ontbyt. Dit het ’n paar dae tevore gesneeu en die stad lyk soos iets uit ’n sprokie. Die besige strate wemel van mense wat op die laaste nippertjie na die perfekte geskenk kom soek. By Bergdorf’s koop hulle ’n trui vir Sue Henning en by FAO Schwartz kry hulle vir Katy ’n opgestopte Nala – nes die een wat Clay vir Sierra gegee het.

Vir Clay besluit Sierra op ’n paar wolsokkies om sy voete warm te hou wanneer hy in sy polisiemotor rondry. Jamie koop vir hom ’n nuwe Bybel – iets waaroor hy op ’n keer gepraat het toe sy in Los Angeles was. Terwyl die winkel sy naam daarop graveer, gaan eet Jamie en Sierra middagete. Sy kry nog ’n paar items in die boekwinkel en betaal.

Hulle is op pad uit toe Jamie op haar horlosie kyk. “Nou ja, my skat, ek dink dis tyd om huis toe te gaan.”

Sierra lyk angstig. “Maar, Mamma, ons was nog nie in al die winkels nie.”

“My liefie, ons sal nooit by al die winkels uitkom nie, selfs al bly ons twee dae.”

“Ek weet, maar ... ” Sierra lek oor haar lippe. “Hoe laat is dit?”

Jamie kyk stip na haar dogtertjie. Gewoonlik is Sierra teen hierdie tyd al moeg en lus om huis toe te gaan. “Dis drieuur.”

Sierra neem dadelik haar hand. “Asseblief, Mamma ... kan ons asseblief nog ’n bietjie langer bly?”

“Sierra ... ” Jamie se voete is seer. Sy is lus om haar gesag as ma te gebruik en te sê dis tyd om huis toe te gaan. Maar dalk het Sierra nou die ouderdom bereik waar ’n dag in die stad nie lank genoeg kan wees nie. Dalk is dit ’n teken dat sy grootword. Sy byt op haar lip en kyk na Sierra. “Dit gaan netnou donker wees.”

Sierra spring op en af. “Ek weet! Dis hoekom ek wil bly; sodat ek die liggies kan sien!”

Die wind waai koud en Jamie trek haar jas stywer om haar vas. Sy trek ’n gesig vir Sierra en neem haar hand. “Nou goed, juffroutjie. Nog een winkel, maar dan is ons klaar. Ons moet by die huis kom.”

Dis halfvyf toe hulle aan boord van die veerboot is. Jamie het verwag dat Sierra gedaan sou wees, maar sy gaan soos ’n klein bobbejaantjie op die amper leë veerboot tekere.

“Hoe lank voor ons daar is?” Sy huppel heen en weer voor Jamie. “Toe, Mamma, hoe lank?”

Jamie wens haar dogtertjie wil lank genoeg stilstaan sodat sy na haar kan kyk. “Sierra, wat het in jou ingevaar?”

“Gelukkigheid, Mamma. Ek is vandag vol gelukkigheid.”

Jamie knip haar oë. Sy kan beswaarlik met Sierra daaroor raas. “Kan jou gelukkigheid nie ’n bietjie rustiger wees nie?” Jamie sit tussen ’n stapel pakkies. Sy is gedaan genoeg vir hulle albei. Die lang dag tussen mense en liggies en Kersmusiek het sy tol geëis en sy is gereed om op haar bed neer te val.

“Mamma het my nie geantwoord nie. Hoe lank voor ons daar is?” Sierra tol twee maal in die rondte en voer ’n impromptu klopdansie uit. “Ek wil leer *tap*, oukei, Mamma? Katy sê sy gaan in graad drie *tap*, en ek wil ook les neem, oukei?” Sy doen nog ’n paar passies.

“Sierra!” Jamie se stem is halflaggend, halfgefrustreerd. “Staan net vir ’n oomblik stil.”

Sierra hou op beweeg. Sy staar na Jamie, uitasem en paraat. “Ja, Mamma. Jammer.”

“Oukei.” Jamie blaas haar asem uit. Net om na haar dogtertjie te kyk, maak haar moeg. “Ons gaan oor twintig minute by die huis wees; en op jou tweede vraag: ja. Ons kan praat oor dansklasse.”

Sierra huppel in die rondte. “Jippie! Vandag is die heel beste dag. Ek is só bly. Is Mamma ook bly?”

Jamie is op die punt om Sierra weer aan te spreek, maar sy kan nie. Om Sierra so te sien, is om ’n prentjie van haarself te sien. Sy het vir so lank nie beweeg nie, magteloos om die musiek, laat staan nog die ritme, van die lewe te hoor. Maar nou dans sy weer. Nes Sierra. Jamie sit agteroor en glimlag vir haar dogtertjie.

Dis bloot Sierra se manier om die lewe te kies.

Vyftien minute later is hulle in hulle motor op pad huis toe. Dis donker, maar daar is steeds geen keer aan Sierra nie. Hoe nader hulle aan die huis kom, hoe lewendiger en lekkerder gesels sy. Jamie probeer nie eens meer om haar geesdrif te demp nie. Sy lag by haarself en luister na Sierra wat noem dat sy bitter baie van rooi haarrekkies hou, en wonder of Wrinkles hierdie jaar spesiale klere vir Kersfees wil hê.

Sy praat soos ’n langasemsprinkaan totdat hulle by die oprit indraai. Toe, soos ’n radio wat afgeskakel word, bly sy stil. Hulle is al na die voordeur toe op pad toe Jamie in haar spore vassteek en na haar asem snak.

In die skynsel van die straatlamp lyk dit amper ...

Dit kan nie wees nie. Hy sou tog nie vroeër gekom het om haar te verras nie? Toe hy opstaan, is haar onsekerheid daarmee heen. Sy laat val haar pakkies en hardloop na hom toe.

“Clay!”

“Lyk my ek het my datums verkeerd gehad.” Hy grinnik en neem haar in sy arms. “Mmmm.” Hy fluister in haar oor. “Ek het jou gemis.”

“Ek kan nie glo jy is hier nie.” Trane brand in haar oë. Dis die heerlikste verrassing in jare. Drie jaar, om presies te wees. Sy staan terug en lig haar wenkbroue in Sierra se rigting. “Het jy iets hiervan geweet, dametjie?”

Sierra giggel en klap haar hande. “Ek het niks gesê nie, oom Clay. Ek het ons geheim gehou.”

Clay en Sierra klap hulle palms teen mekaar. “Mooi so!” Hy knipoog vir haar, die knipoog wat hom nog dieper in Jamie se hart laat inkrui. “Ek het geweet ek kan jou vertrou.”

“Ja, oom Clay. Oom kan my baie vertrou, want ek het nie eens iets gesê van –

Clay plaas sy hand oor haar mond en stoot haar sag in die rigting van die voorstoep.

Jamie staan ’n entjie van hulle af. Sierra en Clay kom so goed oor die weg. Sy sit haar hande op haar heupe. “Nou ja, is daar nog iets waarvan ek moet weet?”

Sierra vorm ’n reguit lyn met haar mond en maak asof sy haar lippe toerits. Sy probeer praat, maar met haar woorde in haar mond vasgekeer, kry sy net geluide uit.

Clay sit sy arm om Sierra en fluister in haar oor. Dan haal hy iets uit sy jassak wat Jamie nie kan uitmaak nie. Moontlik ’n geskenkie of iets. Hy en Sierra knik vir mekaar.

Dit moes die een of ander teken wees, want sy spring op en hardloop na Jamie toe. “Mamma! Kom!” Sierra gryp haar aan die hand en trek haar na Clay toe. “Dis tyd.”

Jamie se hart klop met swaar slae. Wat is dit dié? Dis duidelik dat Clay en Sierra hierdie oomblik beplan het. Sy hou haar asem op. Dit kan nie wees wat sy dink nie, dit waaraan sy nog nie eens in haar gedagtes kan woorde gee nie.

*Nie nou al nie, Here. Ek’s nie gereed nie.*

*Ek is by jou, my kind. Ek is by jou.*

Die antwoord is dadelik daar. Die woorde eggo deur haar hart en help haar om uit te asem. Alles is reg; God is by haar. Hy is by haar, en wat ook al gebeur, Hy is in beheer. Sy kry ’n houvas op haarself. “Oukei.” Sy gee ’n senuweeagtige laggie. “Hoekom is ek die enigste een wat nie weet wat aangaan nie?” Sy staan nou voor Clay en probeer sy oog vang. Die voorwerp wat hy uit sy sak gehaal het, is onder sy arm weggesteek.

Langs haar giggel Sierra. Sy trek aan Jamie se arm. “Bly stil, Mamma. Oom Clay wil iets vir ons vra.”

Toe, asof dit in stadige aksie gebeur, bring Clay ’n klein fluweelhoutertjie te voorskyn. Hy kom staan voor Jamie en sy kry die geur van sy naskeermiddel gemeng met die vars seepgeur wat altyd aan hom kleef.

Sy kyk ondersoekend in sy oë. “Clay?” Dit kan nie regtig besig wees om te gebeur nie. Is sy gereed? Gaan sy ooit gereed wees?

Sierra spring ’n paar keer op haar tone, maar haar mond is weer toegerits.

Jamie se kop draai. Sy kan beswaarlik fokus op wat Clay besig is om te doen. Hy kniel op een been in die krakerige sneeu sonder om haar oë vir ’n oomblik te laat gaan. Dan maak hy die houtertjie oop. Binnekant is daar ’n ring van witgoud met ’n enkele, glinsterende diamant.

“Jamie ... ” Clay kyk deurdringend na haar. Hy haal die ring uit die houtertjie en bêre die fluweelboksie in sy sak. “Hoe meer ek aan die lewe dink, hoe sekerder raak ek van een ding.” Hy sluk en ruil sy bene sodat die ander knie in die sneeu is. “As jy weet wat om te doen, en jy weet dat dit die regte ding is, dan moet jy dit doen. Of dit nou is om iemand te vergewe of vir iemand lief te wees.” Hy staan op en gee ’n tree na haar toe, ’n intense kyk in sy ernstige oë.



“Of om iemand te vra om met jou te trou.”

Sierra gee ’n gillettjie.

Jamie hoor hoe sy haar asem intrek, en haar vingers vlieg na haar mond. Dit voel of die grond onder haar in jellie verander. Dis te gou, nie waar nie? Is dit nie hoe sy sekondes tevore gevoel het nie?

Maar waar sy nou van die ring na Clay kyk, voel dit asof alles in en om haar stil raak. Die gedraai in haar kop hou op en alles buiten sy woorde vervaag.

“Die lewe is broos.” Sy uitdrukking is sober. “Op 11 September het ons dit geleer.” Sy woorde is ’n sagte liefkosing. “Dié van ons wat oorgebly het – almal van ons wat deur daardie dag geraak is – moet ons krag en hoop in Christus vind, en doen wat Hy van ons vra. Ons moet die lewe kies.”

“Clay ... ” Sy voel soos iemand wat weke lank in ’n bos rondgedwaal het, iemand wat nou eers deur die bome sien. Dis asof al haar bekommernisse en kwellings in ’n enkele oomblik in die niet verdwyn. Al wat sy nou voor haar sien, is ’n lieflike, oop landskap. En as sy soontoe loop, sal sy ’n nuwe lewe, ’n nuwe tuiste vir haar en Sierra vind.

“Trou met my, Jamie.” ’n Glimlag speel om sy mond en hy kelk sy een hand om haar wang. “Kom wees my vrou in Kalifornië en begin ’n nuwe lewe saam met my. Vertrou my dat ek jou vir die res van my lewe sal koester, en dat ek alles in my vermoë sal doen om God die middelpunt van ons huis te hou.” Hy knipoog vir Sierra. “Ons almal se huis.”

Sy slaan haar arms om sy nek en voel haar trane kom. “Ja, Clay.” Sy lag en huil gelyk. Hy is reg; maak dit regtig saak dat hulle mekaar nog nie jare lank ken nie? Hulle is nie meer kinders wat nodig het om uit te vind wat hulle uit die lewe wil hê nie. Hulle is twee volwassenes wat van die eerste oomblik bymekaar gehoor het; met geloof as middelpunt van hulle bestaan en ’n wedersydse omgee wat selde twee maal oor ’n mens se pad kom.

Hy trek sy kop terug. Verstomming en onsekerheid wedywer in sy oë. “Sal jy regtig?”

Sy laat val haar kop agteroor en lag hardop. Sy kyk na Sierra en trek haar in hulle omhelsing in. Dan kyk sy weer na Clay. “Ja, ek sal met jou trou.”

“En ons kan in Kalifornië gaan bly, nè, Mamma? Want ek dink dit sal die heel beste wees om by oom Clay te bly én naby Disneyland te wees.”

Hulle lag en Jamie besef dat daardie vraag ook nou beantwoord is. Een wat nie pynlik of angswekkend of geforseerd voel nie, want maak nie saak hoe dikwels sy vir haarself sê dat sy nie gereed is nie, sy dink al ’n geruime tyd daaraan. Sy ontmoet Clay se oë en glimlag. Dis goed dat sy arms om haar is, anders het sy dalk weggesweef.

“Nou ja?” Die onsekerheid is weg uit sy gesig.

“Ja.” Jamie sê dit een maal en die tweede keer gil sy dit amper. “Ja!” Sy trek Clay en Sierra stywer teen haar vas. “Ek sal met jou trou, Clay, en ek sal saam met jou in Disneyland gaan bly as jy wil.” Haar stem versag en sy kry hoendervleis by die besef van God se voorsiening, sy volmaakte tydskerekening. “Ek en Sierra sal gaan waar jy gaan, Clay. Van nou af.”

Die sekerheid in haar hart is in sement gegiet. Dis 'n vaste, soet sekerheid, getint met die hartseer van totsiens, want ná vandag sal sy nooit weer in 'n monument bly nie. Oor 'n klein rukkie sal sy nooit weer in een werk nie. Haar verlede – hoe mooi dit ook al was – sal eenvoudig haar verlede wees.

Haar gisters behoort aan Jake Bryan waar dit altyd sal hoort.

Maar omdat God goed is, omdat Hy haar gelei het om die lewe te kies, het sy 'n tuiste in haar toekoms gevind. Vir haar en Sierra. 'n Toekoms wat skielik blink en oorvloedig en vol heerlike verwagtings is. 'n Tuiste by Clay.

En wie weet, dalk word hulle eendag met nog 'n kind geseën.

Sy sal nie meer Jamie Bryan wees nie, behalwe in haar verre verlede. Haar toekoms gaan haar na 'n plek neem waar sy 'n nuwe naam sal hê – Jamie Michaels.

Die ongelooflikste gevoel golf deur haar. *Jamie Michaels*. Die twee woorde dra deur die stil plekke in haar hart. Clay se aanraking laat haar opkyk. Sy leun oor en soen hom deur haar trane. 'n Soen vol blydschap oor 'n toekoms wat nou maar eers begin.

# Chapter TWENTY-NINE

Sierra was almost finished packing.

Mommy had given her a big suitcase for her clothes and special things. Special things didn't go on the moving truck; they went with her on the airplane. Sierra got jumbles in her tummy whenever she thought of the moving truck, because it was coming in two days and then some mover guys would come into the house and take everything into the back of the truck.

Even their van!

But the jumbles and rumblies were extra moving around now that the truck was coming so soon. Because that meant they had to finish packing and do the thing Sierra didn't really want to do. Tell Katy and Mrs. Henning good-bye.

She'd already told her class friends good-bye. James jumped up and down and gave her a little punch in the arm when she told him she was getting a second daddy too. Just like he got a second daddy. Her teacher said the class would miss her, but she would have a wonderful life in California.

Sierra sat on her bed next to Wrinkles and studied her open suitcase.

It was true. She couldn't wait to get to California. They were going to live in something called a 'partment for a little while. Until summertime. That's when Mommy and Clay were getting married, and after that Sierra could call Clay the thing she wanted to call him.

Daddy.

A sad feeling came into her heart. But not her first daddy, because nothing could ever erase her first daddy's face from her heart. Clay would be her second daddy; just as nice and wonderful as her first daddy, but different.

She was running out of room in her suitcase, and she knew why. The helmet took up half the space. It was her first daddy's helmet, the one he

wore when he was fighting fires. The one he was wearing when the Twin Towers fell down. She dropped to her knees next to the suitcase and patted the top of the helmet. It was big and strong looking, the way her first daddy had always looked.

The helmet made her remember some special times with that daddy. Times when he gave her horsie rides and curled her hair and did butterfly kisses and took her to church and sang songs with her. She looked around her room. Sometimes when she wanted to remember him she only had to move her eyes so they would see a special place. Like the chair she and Daddy sat in or the place on her bedroom floor where they used to play horsie.

So what about when she didn't have this house anymore?

Stinging happened in her eyes and she blinked. Wrinkles jumped off the bed and curled up next to her on the floor.

"Wrinkles, you know what?" Sierra stirred her fingers in the soft hair at the top of her cat's head. "Maybe I don't really want to move." The cat yawned very big and did a few slow blinks. Probably he wasn't getting enough sleep.

Sierra looked at the place on the floor a little ways away, where she and Daddy used to play. At the same time, two hot little tears splashed down her cheeks. Then she looked at the helmet in her suitcase. And suddenly in her heart an idea started.

If she looked hard enough at her daddy's firefighter helmet, she could see him. She had always been able to see him. So maybe she didn't need her very own house to remember him. Maybe she could remember him even in a 'partment. And something else too.

Mommy said her first daddy would always be in her heart. Because in her heart she would always be that little girl with long yellow curlies walking into church, holding her daddy's hand.

And he would always be her hero.

She put her hand on the helmet and looked hard at it. Her first daddy

wouldn't want her to stay in the old house if it meant not having Clay. Because Clay was very big and strong, just like Daddy was. And plus he liked *Lion King* just like her, and he even liked to play dress-up.

In California they would have other family too. Clay's family. And that meant she would get to see Mr. Michaels. Mommy said Mr. Michaels would be her uncle after they got married, and Josh—the nice boy who played Frisbee with her—would be her cousin.

So that was pretty nice. And after school was over and Mommy and Clay got married, they would all live in a house with a swimming pool! A real in-the-ground swimming pool!

She patted Wrinkles on the head. "We can get a little boat for you, Wrinkles. And you can go sailing while I swim, okay?"

Wrinkles closed his eyes, because he needed his rest. Mommy said he wouldn't sleep much in the plane because he had to be in a big box down with the luggage. Sierra hadn't told Wrinkles about that yet. Some things were better if they were surprises, actually. Plus also, Wrinkles might not want to go if he knew he was flying to California with the luggage.

Once more she looked at the helmet, and this time she picked it up and held it to her heart. She kissed the top of the helmet and then held it a little higher and gave it butterfly kisses, first with one set of eyelashes and then the other.

When she was done, she set the helmet back in her suitcase and a smile came to her face. Because she could still see him, her first daddy. Tall and nice and laughing, standing right beside her. And deep inside she could hear God telling her some good news. Yes, her daddy would always be there, the same way he was now. Whether they lived in Staten Island or California, he would be there.

Forever and ever and ever.

Jamie stood in the doorway and stared into her empty house.

The movers had come and were already headed west. She and Sierra

had stayed one last night, and at four o'clock they would fly nonstop to Los Angeles. Now they had all day to say their good-byes.

The old house was first on the list.

"Okay, Sierra." Jamie glanced at her daughter, sitting on the front porch steps sticking her finger through the holes in Wrinkles's air carrier box. The For Sale sign was fifteen yards away, sticking out of the snow. "Come say good-bye to your house."

Sierra looked up. "I already did, Mommy. After the movers left yesterday." She bit her lip. "Can I stay out here with Wrinkles?"

Jamie gave her a sad smile. "Okay." She looked back through the front door. "I'll hurry."

She started upstairs with Sierra's room, the same room she and her sister had slept in as little girls. She welcomed the torrent of memories, little moments that formed the skeleton of her entire life. It was a small room with a single window. Nothing remarkable, except the fact that it had been hers since she was born.

Now it would belong to someone else. "Good-bye, little room." She stepped out and closed the door.

The next room would be hardest of all. Her bedroom. The place where her parents had slept so many years ago; the place where she and Jake had shared their love for nearly a decade.

Jamie worked the muscles in her jaw and squinted, blinded by the brightness of the past. This was why she needed to move, why she couldn't welcome Clay into her East Coast world. Because in this house, her memories were so alive they fairly breathed. She would take them with her, of course. They were woven into the fabric of who she was. But if she was to have new life, she would need new surroundings.

She closed her eyes, stepped back, and closed that door.

The rest of the house was easier, though the memories of all that had happened there—family dinners, birthday parties, movie nights, and a thousand other memories—were not. She floated through the rooms, hating

the emptiness, allowing the image of those warm old walls to burn a forever impression in her mind.

Soon she was back at the front door, taking one last look. She breathed in slow—she would even miss the smell of it, the old wood and windows.

It smelled like home. The way home had always smelled.

Jamie had known this day would involve tears, and it was no surprise that they kicked into action now. She hesitated. *God...bless whoever comes here next, whoever lives here and loves here and laughs here the way we did. Bless them that they might feel Your Spirit and know You are in this place.*

Then, her eyes blurred, she stepped back, closed the door, and locked it.

Sierra looked up at her and immediately she understood. “Mommy, it’s okay.” She stood and gave her a hug around her waist. “California will be good too.”

“I know it will.” Jamie sniffed. She gave Sierra a sad smile and looked deep into her eyes. “Crying is okay, you know why?”

“Why?” Sierra’s eyes were damp too. The day was bound to be hard for both of them.

“Because if you cry a lot when you say good-bye, it means you loved a lot.” She stooped down and kissed Sierra’s nose. “Do you understand that?”

“Yes, Mommy.” Sierra lowered her brow, very serious. “Then today will be a lot of crying. Because I loved living here and being friends with Katy Henning a very lot.”

At that moment, the Hennings’ car pulled up. Sue was picking them up and taking them to lunch. After that, Jamie and Sierra would board the ferry to Manhattan, and from there catch a cab to the airport.

Sue climbed out of her pickup truck, and the moment their eyes met, Jamie saw she wasn’t the only one affected. Sue was crying too. She

crossed the yard, her eyes on Jamie the entire time. Sierra ran to the car to see Katy and little Larry, both buckled into the backseat.

“I’ll miss you so much.” Sue hugged her, expressing the sorrow Jamie knew had been building for both of them since she accepted Clay’s proposal. Sue stepped back and dragged her hand across her cheeks. “I’m sorry; you don’t need this. It’s just...” Her features twisted as she gave a sideways nod of her head. “You’re like a sister to me, Jamie. After all we’ve been through. The guys...our faith—” Two short sobs interrupted her. “I can’t...imagine life without you.”

“Oh, Sue.” Jamie held her again. “I’ll visit. I promise I will.” She took her friend’s shoulders and leaned back enough to see her eyes. “And you will too. Okay? This spring you fly out, and we’ll take the kids to Disneyland, okay?”

Sue nodded, but still the tears poured down her face. She stared at Jamie’s house for several seconds and then grabbed a suitcase with each hand. When the car was loaded and they drove off, the conversation lightened up. They spent the morning at the Henning house, talking about old times, remembering the friendship between Larry and Jake, how fun they were together, how well they embraced life right until the end.

They shared lunch together and cried again when Sue dropped them off at the ferry. Less, this time, because of their own sorrow than the sadness of seeing their daughters say good-bye.

Sierra hugged Katy tight. “Don’t forget me, Katy. Best friends forever, okay?”

“Best friends forever.” Katy ran to Sue’s side and buried her face in her mother’s jacket.

Both girls were crying too hard to say more than that. Jamie gave one last wave to Sue, and a look that told her this wasn’t the end. That a friendship like theirs, forged out of the very best moments and the most horrifically painful ones, would not end simply because of a move.

Sue and her children turned then and headed back for their car; Jamie



did the same, pulling their suitcases while Sierra clutched Wrinkles's carrier. Just before they boarded the ferry, Sierra stopped, stooped down, and spread her hand out on the ground.

"What're you doing, honey?" Jamie felt her tears drying in the winter wind. She pulled up and watched her daughter.

"Saying good-bye." Sierra stood and picked up Wrinkles again. "Good-bye to Staten Island."

The ferry ride felt faster than usual, and they found a cab without any wait. Jamie directed the driver to St. Paul's, promising to pay him extra if he'd wait while she and Sierra ran inside.

She'd had her last shift two weeks earlier, but it wouldn't be right to pass by the area without a final farewell. Someday she'd come to St. Paul's again, but once the new buildings were built—the ones that would stand where the Twin Towers had stood—the atmosphere at the chapel would change.

Items that formed the memorial inside the little church would be moved to the official memorial, the one planned for somewhere in the new construction. And St. Paul's would return to being only a nice little chapel in the middle of Manhattan's financial district. A landmark, yes, but not the mission it had been in the years after September 11.

Jamie wasn't sure she wanted to see St. Paul's that way.

Neither did most of the other volunteers, those who helped remove the pile of debris and those who served and offered their time. She was part of a community of people who would never enter St. Paul's without seeing the place lined with posters and pictures and letters, without seeing photographs of the dead and pews full of vacant-eyed firefighters, covered in soot and weary from the grim task of working the pile.

This...this final good-bye, was the last time the chapel would look the way she would always remember it.

She led Sierra by the hand, jogged lightly across the street, up the steps, and inside. The place was quiet, as usual. She turned to the first

table, the one on the left of the front door, and immediately found Jake's picture.

Sierra stayed close at her side. "That's Daddy!"

"Yes." Jamie had always figured she would know when it was right to bring Sierra. But they'd run out of time, so right or not, this was the moment. "Remember when I would do my volunteer work?"

"Yes." Sierra looked at her, eyes wide.

"Well—" Jamie shifted her eyes back to Jake's picture—"this is where I would come."

"Oh." Sierra looked at the picture again too. Then she caught a quick breath and pointed. "That's my letter to Daddy!"

"Yep." Jamie put her arm around Sierra's shoulders and hugged her. "It'll stay with his picture for always."

Sierra thought about that for a minute. "I like that."

One of the other volunteers approached her then, an older woman who had connected often with Jamie. She knew why Jamie was there and she introduced herself to Sierra. "Want some cookies upstairs? I baked them this morning."

Sierra looked at Jamie. "Can I?"

"Yes." Jamie cast the woman a grateful look. "But only for a minute. The cab's waiting."

Sierra went off with the woman. Once she was gone, Jamie turned and found Jake's picture again. Sweet Jake, the man who had prayed for her and cherished her and written words that guided her way still. The man who had led her to God.

She looked deep into his eyes. So much of their time together she had worried about him, that he would lose his life fighting fires. What a waste of time. If she had it to do all over again, she would choose to love Jake, even knowing their time together would be short.

The lessons he'd taught her would live on, as would the memory of his love. Yes, the page was turning. She could feel it in her heart, feel the

way St. Paul's didn't quite have the same hold on her as it once had. She didn't need a memorial to remember Jake, to honor him.

She would do that with her life.

The volunteer returned with Sierra, and Jamie hugged the woman. "Tell the others good-bye, okay?"

"I will." She pulled an envelope from her pocket. "Aaron Hisel told me to give this to you. He heard you were moving."

Jamie's heart sank. Aaron had been important in her life for a time, one of the reasons she'd been able to process the pain of losing Jake. She would miss him, even though their time together had ended long before she decided to marry Clay.

"Did...did he say anything?"

The woman smiled. "He wanted you to hear it from him."

Jamie nodded. She slipped the envelope in her coat pocket, said another quick good-bye, and led Sierra back outside. She walked to the corner and for a moment she stared at the empty sky, the place where the buildings had stood.

It would be good to get away from that part of the skyline, good to know she could drive to the market without catching a glimpse of the emptiness. Jake went into those towers because it was the right thing to do. She had no doubt that even until the last few seconds, he and Larry were helping people, probably praying with them and telling them about Jesus.

She didn't need St. Paul's or Ground Zero to remind her of that.

"That's where the Twin Towers were, right, Mommy?" Sierra squinted up, shading her eyes so she could see despite the glare from the snow and white cloudy sky.

"Yes." Even now she hated the past tense, hated how it reminded her that such an awful thing really had happened. "That's where they were."

Sierra looked at her and squeezed her hand a little tighter. "But that's not where Daddy is now. Daddy's in heaven." Her eyes were dry now, the trauma of good-bye already fading. She touched her fingers to her chest.

“And his picture is right here.” She angled her head, her eyes curious. “Do you think Daddy’s happy that we’re moving to California and marrying Clay?”

Jamie looked at her feet for a minute and then up at the empty skyline again. Jake’s smile, the memory of it, flashed in her mind as big and bright as heaven itself. “Yes, Sierra. I think he’s very happy.”

The plane was halfway to Los Angeles when Jamie remembered Aaron’s letter. Sierra was sleeping in the seat beside her, so she was careful not to wake her. She pulled out the envelope, opened it, and slid out the letter.

*Dear Jamie,*

*I won’t make this long, but I promised you I’d tell you if something changed. Well, something did.*

Jamie closed her eyes, her heart doing a double beat. What was this? Aaron couldn’t be talking about the one thing they never agreed on, could he? She blinked and found her place.

*One of the new guys at the station had a baby with a heart problem. The guy asked every one of us who believed to pray. You know me; I told him I couldn’t pray because I didn’t believe. But that night I asked God to show me He was real, let me know if I was wrong about the whole faith thing.*

*And guess what happened?*

*The new guy comes up to me the next day and says, “You don’t have to believe in God, Hisel, He believes in you.”*

*The exact words you told me. And I don’t know, I got chills and something happened inside me. Like I knew right then that God was real, and He was there. I’m not saying I have it all figured out or any of it figured out, really. But the new guy’s talking to me. He’s buying me a Bible.*

*I guess I just wanted you to know so you could keep praying for me. I already know Jake’s praying. I’m happy for you, Jamie. Take care of yourself.*

Jamie blinked back tears and read the letter again. Then she closed her eyes and let her head fall against the seat back. *God...You're so good, so faithful. I knew You'd get Aaron's attention, and now You have. You work all things out in Your timing.*

The hum of the jet soothed her, helped clear her mind.

She opened her eyes and looked out the window. Down below were clusters of lights, places where families gathered, sharing notes from a day of work or school. The way she and Clay and Sierra would be soon.

Joy rose up within her and warmed her heart. There was really nothing more to be sad about. She pictured Clay's face, the way he would look when they got off the plane and walked into his world once and for all. Thoughts of the future filled her head. It would be so good to see him and hold him and plan a wedding with him, so much fun unpacking her things and watching Sierra and Clay and Wrinkles play dress-up together.

*Choose life.* Jake's voice sounded in her soul once more, ringing with sincerity and faith, the way it had always done back when he was alive, when he was hers. *Choose life, Jamie. Choose life.*

She smiled at the sleeping form of their daughter. *I am, Jake. I'm choosing life.*

The jet engines hummed low in the background. She looked out the window, every mountain or field they passed taking them a little closer to California. Closer to Clay. A warm certainty settled in her chest, convincing her of what she'd known all along. With all its trials and tragedies, all its brokenhearted confusion, life was still the greatest choice of all. God-given life. That was her choice.

Now and always.

## Nege-en-twintig

Sierra is amper klaar gepak.

Mamma het vir haar 'n groot tas vir haar klere en spesiale goed gegee. Spesiale goed wat sy nie wil hê moet in die meubelwa kom nie. Haar maag krewel elke keer as sy aan die meubelwa dink, want hy kom oor twee dae en dan gaan die trekemense inkom en alles in hulle huis in die vragmotor laai.

Selfs hulle kar!

Hoe nader die trek kom, hoe erger raak die krewelrige gevoel op haar maag. Dit beteken dat hulle moet klaar pak en iets gaan doen wat Sierra nie regtig wil doen nie. Vir Katy en tannie Sue gaan totdiens sê.

Sy het reeds haar maatjies by die skool gegroet. James het op en af gespring en haar 'n vriendelike bokshou op die arm gegee toe sy vir hom sê dat sy ook 'n tweede pappa gaan kry. Net soos hy. Haar juffrou het gesê die klas gaan haar mis, maar sy gaan 'n wonderlike lewe in Kalifornië hê.

Sierra sit op die mat en bestudeer die inhoud in haar tas.

Dis waar. Sy kan nie wag om in Kalifornië te wees nie. Hulle gaan vir 'n rukkie in 'n woonstel bly. Tot dit somer is. Dis wanneer Mamma en oom Clay gaan trou, en daarna kan Sierra hom noem wat sy hom die graagste wil noem

—

Pappa.

'n Treurige gevoel kom in haar hart. Maar hy sal nie haar eerste pappa wees nie, want niemand kan ooit haar eerste pappa se gesig uit haar hart vat nie. Oom Clay sal haar tweede pappa wees; net so gaaf en wonderlik soos haar eerste pappa, maar anders.

Sy het amper nie meer plek in haar tas nie, en sy weet hoekom. Die helm maak die helfte van die tas vol. Dis haar pappa se helm, die een wat hy gedra het wanneer hy vure doodgemaak het. Die een wat hy gedra het toe die Twin Towers verwoes is. Sy gaan sit op haar knieë langs die tas en vryf oor die bokant van die helm. Dis groot en lyk sterk, net soos haar eerste pappa altyd gelyk het.

Die helm herinner haar aan spesiale tye saam met daardie pappa. Toe hy haar laat perdjie ry het en haar hare ingedraai het en vir haar vlindersoentjies gegee het en haar kerk toe gevat het en saam met haar gesing het. Sy kyk om haar rond. Partykeer wanneer sy hom wil onthou, moet sy net haar oë beweeg totdat hulle 'n spesiale plek sien. Soos die stoel waarop sy en Pappa gesit het of die plek op haar vloer waar hulle perdjie gespeel het.

Hoe gaan dit werk as hulle nie meer hierdie huis het nie?

Haar oë brand en sy knip hulle. Wrinkles spring van die bed af en krul hom langs haar op.

“Wrinkles, weet jy wat?” Sierra roer haar vingers deur die sagte hare tussen die kat se oortjies. “Dalk wil ek nie regtig trek nie.”

Die kat gaap 'n baie groot gaap en knip sy oë 'n paar keer stadig. Dalk kry hy nie genoeg slaap nie.

Sierra kyk na die plek op die vloer waar sy en Pappa altyd gespeel het. Op dieselfde oomblik rol twee warm tranes oor haar wange. Toe kyk sy na die helm in haar tas. En skielik kry sy 'n idee. As sy hard genoeg na haar pa se

brandweerhelm kyk, kan sy hom sien. Sy kon hom nog altyd sien. Dalk hoef sy nie in haar eie huis te wees om hom te onthou nie. Dalk kan sy hom selfs in 'n woonstel onthou. En daar's nog iets.

Mamma het gesê haar eerste pappa sal altyd in haar hart wees. Want in haar hart sal sy altyd daardie klein dogtertjie met die lang wit krulhare wees wat saam met haar pappa kerk toe gaan. En hy sal altyd haar held wees.

Sy sit haar hand op die helm en kyk stip daarna. Haar eerste pappa sou nie wou hê dat sy in die ou huis moet bly as hulle by oom Clay moet gaan bly nie. Want oom Clay is baie groot en sterk, net soos Pappa was. En dan hou hy ook nog van *The Lion King*, én hy hou daarvan om saam met haar en Wrinkles tee te drink en snaakse hoede op te sit.

In Kalifornië gaan hulle ook ander familie bykry. Oom Clay se familie. En dit beteken dat sy vir oom Eric gaan sien. Mamma sê oom Eric gaan haar oom wees wanneer hulle trou, en Josh – die gawe seun wat saam met haar frisbee gespeel het – gaan haar nefie wees.

Dit gaan eintlik lekker wees. En wanneer die skool toemaak en Mamma en oom Clay trou, gaan hulle in 'n huis met 'n swembad bly! 'n Regte swembad in die grond!

Sy vryf oor Wrinkles se kop. “Ons kan vir jou 'n klein bootjie kry, Wrinkles. Dan kan jy 'n bietjie seil terwyl ek swem, oukei?”

Wrinkles se oë gaan toe, want hy het sy rus nodig. Mamma sê hy gaan nie baie op die vliegtuig slaap nie, want hulle gaan hom in 'n groot boks by die bagasie onder die vliegtuig sit. Sierra het dit nog nie vir Wrinkles gesê nie. Party goed is eintlik beter as hulle verrassings is. Die ander ding is, Wrinkles sal dalk nie wil saamkom as hy weet hy vlieg saam met die bagasie nie.

Sy kyk weer na die helm en hierdie keer tel sy dit op en hou dit teen haar bors. Sy soen die bokant van die helm en toe gee sy dit 'n paar vlindersoentjies, eers met haar een stel wimpers en toe die ander. Daarna sit sy die helm weer in haar tas en glimlag. Want sy kan hom nog steeds sien, haar eerste pappa. Groot en vriendelik en met 'n breë glimlag op sy gesig. Diep in haar hart sê die Here vir haar iets wat haar bly maak. Ja, haar pappa sal altyd daar wees. Of hulle nou op Staten Island of in Kalifornië is, hy sal daar wees. Vir altyd en altyd.

Jamie staan in die deur en kyk na haar leë huis.

Die verhuisers het gekom en hulle meubels is reeds op pad na Kalifornië. Sy en Sierra het nog 'n laaste aand oorgebly en vieruur vanmiddag neem hulle 'n direkte vlug na Los Angeles. Nou het hulle die hele dag om totsiens te sê.

Die ou huis is eerste op haar lys.

“Nou goed, Sierra.” Jamie kyk na haar dogtertjie waar sy op die stoeptrappies sit en haar vingers deur die gate in Wrinkles se vliegtuighouer steek. 'n Paar meter weg steek die “Te Koop”-bordjie uit die sneeu. “Kom ons sê totsiens vir ons huis.”

Sy kyk op. “Ek het klaar, Mamma. Gister toe die trekmense gery het.” Sy byt op haar lip. “Kan ek hier buite by Wrinkles bly?”

Jamie glimlag hartseer vir haar. “Oukei.” Sy kyk terug deur die voordeur. “Ek sal gou maak.”

Sy begin bo by Sierra se kamer, dieselfde kamer waar sy en haar suster as dogtertjies geslaap het. Sy gee haar oor aan die stortvloed herinneringe, klein oomblikke wat die raamwerk van haar hele lewe vorm. Dis ’n kleinerige kamer met een venster. Niks merkwaardigs nie, buiten vir die feit dat dit hare was sedert sy gebore is.

Nou gaan dit aan iemand anders behoort. “Totsiens, liewe kamer.” Sy gaan uit en maak die deur toe.

Die volgende kamer gaan die moeilikste een wees. Haar kamer. Die plek waar haar ouers soveel jare gelede geslaap het; die kamer wat sy en Jake vir amper ’n dekade gedeel het.

Jamie byt op haar tande en skreef haar oë asof verblind deur die skielike helderheid van die verlede. Dis waarom sy moet trek, waarom sy Clay nie in haar wêreld op Staten Island kan innooi nie. Want in hierdie huis is haar herinneringe so lewend dat hulle amper asemhaal. Ja, sy sal hulle met haar saamneem. Hulle is verweef met haar menswees. Maar as sy ’n nuwe lewe wil hê, sal sy ’n nuwe omgewing nodig hê.

Sy maak haar oë toe, tree terug en maak die deur toe.

Die res van die huis is makliker, maar die herinneringe aan alles wat daar gebeur het – gesinsetes, verjaarsdagpartytjies, videoaande en duisende ander herinneringe – bly seer. Sy beweeg deur die vertrekke, nou aaklig leeg, en laat toe dat die beeld van die bekende ou mure vir ewig in haar hart gegraveer word.

Ná ’n rukkie is sy terug by die voordeur en kyk sy ’n laaste keer om haar rond. Sy trek haar asem stadig in – sy gaan selfs die reuk van die ou hout en vensters mis. Dit ruik soos haar tuiste. Soos haar tuiste nog altyd geruik het.

*Jamie het geweet dat vandag nie sonder trane sal wees nie, en sy is nie verbaas toe hulle nou in haar oë brand nie. Sy aarsel. Here ... seën die mense wat ná ons hier gaan kom bly. Gee dat hulle nes ons hier sal lewe en liefhê en lag. En gee dat hulle van u Gees sal bewus wees en sal weet dat U in hierdie huis is.*

Haar oë is wasig toe sy uitgaan, die deur toetrek en sluit.

Sierra kyk na haar en sy verstaan dadelik. “Mamma, dis oukei.” Sy staan op en gee haar ’n drukkie. “Kalifornië gaan ook lekker wees.”

“Ek weet, my skat.” Jamie snuif. Sy gee Sierra ’n hartseer glimlag en kyk diep in haar oë. “’n Mens mag maar huil; weet jy hoekom?”

“Hoekom?” Sierra se oë is ook tranerig. Dit gaan vir hulle albei ’n swaar dag wees.

“Want as ’n mens baie huil wanneer jy vir iemand totsiens sê, beteken dit jy is baie lief vir hom.” Sy buk en soen Sierra op die neus. “Verstaan jy?”

“Ja, Mamma.” Sierra frons baie ernstig. “Dan gaan ek vandag baie huil. Want ek is baie lief vir ons huis en Staten Island en Katy.”



Op daardie oomblik draai die Hennings se motor by hulle oprit in. Sue kom hulle oplaai vir middagete. Daarna sal Jamie en Sierra met die veerboot Manhattan toe gaan van waar hulle 'n taxi na die lughawe neem.

Sue klim uit haar bakkie en die oomblik toe hulle oë ontmoet, sien Jamie dat sy nie die enigste een is wat emosioneel is nie. Sue het ook gehuil. Sy loop na die huis toe, haar oë die hele tyd op Jamie. Sierra hardloop na die motor toe om vir Katy en Larry te gaan hallo sê wat albei op die agtersitplek vasgegordel is.

“Ek gaan jou so mis.” Sue druk haar vas en gee uiting aan die hartseer wat in hulle albei opgebou het vandat sy Clay se huweliksaanbod aanvaar het. Sy staan terug en vee met haar hand oor haar wange. “Ek’s jammer; jy het dit nie nodig nie. Dis net ...” Haar gesig vertrek toe sy haar kop skeef hou. “Jy is soos ’n sussie vir my, Jamie. Na alles wat ons saam deur is. Die ouens ... ons geloof ...” Sy snik twee maal. “Ek kan my nie my lewe sonder jou voorstel nie.”

“Ag, Sue.” Jamie gee haar nog ’n drukkie. “Ek sal kom kuier. Ek belowe.” Sy plaas haar hande op haar vriendin se skouers en leun terug sodat sy in haar oë kan kyk. “En jy gaan ook. Oukei? Kom sommer in die lente, dan neem ons die kinders Disneyland toe.”

Sue knik, maar die trane stroom oor haar wange. Sy kyk vir ’n paar sekondes na Jamie se huis voordat sy ’n tas in elke hand optel. Toe die bakkie gelaai is en hulle wegry, raak die gesprek lighartiger. Hulle bring die oggend by die Henning-huis deur en gesels oor die ou dae, die vriendskap tussen Larry en Jake, hoeveel pret hulle gehad het en met hoeveel oorgawe hulle tot aan die einde gelewe het.

Hulle eet saam en huil weer toe Sue hulle by die veerboot aflaai. Hierdie keer nie soseer oor hulle eie hartseer as om te sien hoe hulle dogtertjies afskeid neem nie.

Sierra gee vir Katy ’n stywe drukkie. “Moenie van my vergeet nie, Katy. Jy sal altyd my beste maatjie wees, oukei?”

“En jy sal altyd my beste maatjie wees.” Katy hardloop na Sue toe en druk haar gesig in haar ma se jas.

Daarna huil albei dogtertjies so hartstogtelik dat hulle nie verder kan praat nie. Jamie waai ’n laaste keer vir Sue, en sê met haar oë dat dit nie die einde is nie. Dat ’n vriendskap wat deur die heel gelukkigste en ontsettend pynlikste oomblikke gevorm is, nie bloot as gevolg van ’n verhuising sal doodloop nie.

Sue en haar kinders draai om en loop terug na hulle motor toe; Jamie doen dieselfde. Sy trek hulle tasse terwyl Sierra Wrinkles se hok dra. Net voordat hulle aan boord gaan, steek Sierra vas, buk en sit haar hand plat op die grond.

“Wat doen jy, my skat?” Die wind waai Jamie se wange droog. Sy gaan staan en kyk na haar dogtertjie.

“Ek sê totsiens.” Sierra kom orent en tel Wrinkles weer op. “Totsiens vir Staten Island.”

Die veerbootrit is gouer as gewoonlik verby, en hulle kry dadelik ’n taxi.

Jamie vra die bestuurder om hulle St. Paul's toe te neem en belowe om hom ekstra te betaal as hy sal wag terwyl sy en Sierra gou ingaan.

Sy het twee weke gelede vir die laaste keer kom werk, maar dit sal nie reg wees om hier verby te kom sonder om vir oulaas te kom afskeid neem nie. Sy sal eendag weer na St. Paul's toe kom, maar wanneer die nuwe geboue eers opgerig is – op die plek waar die Twin Towers voorheen gestaan het. Dan sal die atmosfeer in die kapel nie meer dieselfde wees nie.

Die items wat in die klein kerkie uitgestal word, sal na die amptelike gedenkplek verskuif word wat deel van die nuwe konstruksies sal wees. En St. Paul's sal weer net 'n mooi klein kappelletjie in die middel van Manhattan se finansiële distrik wees. 'n Landmerk, ja, maar nie die toevlugsoord wat dit in die jare ná 11 September was nie.

Jamie is nie seker of sy St. Paul's so wil sien nie.

Die meeste van die ander vrywilligers ook nie. Saam met die mense wat met die opruimingswerk gehelp het en almal wat hulle dienste aangebied en hulle tyd opgeoffer het, behoort Jamie aan 'n gemeenskap wat nooit in St. Paul's sal kom sonder om die plakkate en briewe teen die mure, die foto's van die oorledenes en die banke vol roetbesmeerde en uitgeputte brandweermanne te sien nie.

Vandag is sy hier vir die laaste totsiens, die laaste keer wat die kapel sal lyk soos sy dit altyd sal onthou.

Sy neem Sierra aan die hand en draf ligvoets oor die straat. Soos gewoonlik is dit stil in die kapel. Sy loop na die eerste tafel toe, die een links van die voordeur en Jake se foto vang onmiddellik haar oog.

Sierra staan styf langs haar. “Dis Pappa!”

“Ja.” Jamie het altyd aangeneem sy sou weet wanneer die tyd reg was om Sierra te bring. Maar hulle tyd het opgeraak, en reg of verkeerd, dis nou die oomblik. “Onthou jy toe ek altyd vrywilligerswerk gedoen het?”

“Ja.” Sierra kyk met groot oë na haar.

“Nou ja,” Jamie kyk weer na Jake se foto, “dis waar ek gewerk het.”

“O.” Sierra kyk ook weer na die foto. Dan trek sy haar asem vinnig in en wys met haar vinger. “Daar's die brief wat ek vir Pappa geskryf het!”

“Jip.” Jamie sit haar arm om Sierra se skouers en gee haar 'n drukkie. “Dit sal vir altyd by sy foto bly.”

Sierra dink 'n oomblik daaroor na. “Dis goed so.”

Een van die ander vrywilligers kom staan by hulle, 'n ouer vrou wat Jamie goed leer ken het. Sy weet waarom Jamie hier is en stel haarself aan Sierra voor. “Is jy lus vir koekies bo in die personeelkamer? Ek het hulle vanoggend gebak.”

Sierra kyk na Jamie. “Kan ek?”

“Ja.” Jamie kyk dankbaar na die vrou. “Maar moenie lank wees nie. Die taxi wag vir ons.”

Sierra loop saam met die vrou. Toe sy alleen is, draai Jamie weer na die tafel en kyk na Jake se foto. Liefste Jake, die man wat vir haar gebed het, haar

liefgehad het en wie se woorde haar steeds lei. Die man wat haar na die Here toe gelei het.

Sy kyk diep in sy oë. Sy het haar soveel jaar oor hom bekommer, gevrees dat hy sy lewe in 'n brand sou verloor. Wat 'n vermorsing van tyd en energie. As sy dit weer moes doen, sou sy kies om Jake met oorgawe lief te hê, selfs al het sy geweet dat hulle tyd saam kort sou wees.

Dit wat hy haar geleer het, sal haar bybly, nes die herinnering aan sy liefde. Ja, dis die begin van 'n nuwe hoofstuk. Sy voel dit in haar hart, die feit dat St. Paul's nie meer dieselfde houvas op haar het nie. Sy het nie 'n monument nodig om Jake te onthou of te huldig nie. Sy sal dit met haar lewe doen.

Die vrywilliger en Sierra kom terug, en Jamie gee vir die vrou 'n drukkie. "Sê totsiens vir die ander, sal jy?"

"Ek sal so maak." Sy haal 'n koevert uit haar sak. "Aaron Hisel het gesê ek moet dié vir jou gee. Hy het gehoor jy gaan weg."

Jamie se moed sak in haar skoene. Aaron het vir 'n tyd lank 'n belangrike rol in haar lewe gespeel, een van die redes waarom sy die pyn rondom Jake se dood kon verwerk. Sy gaan hom mis, selfs al het hulle tyd saam lank voor haar besluit om met Clay te trou geëindig.

"Het ... het hy iets gesê?"

Die vrou knik. "Hy wou hê jy moes dit by hom hoor."

Jamie knik. Sy steek die koevert in haar jassak, sê weer vinnig totsiens en gaan saam met Sierra buitentoe. Sy loop tot op die hoek en vir 'n oomblik kyk sy op in die lug waar die twee torings gestaan het.

Dit sal goed wees om te weet sy kan winkel toe ry sonder om op die horison te soek na waar die torings eens gestaan het. Jake het na die World Trade Center toe gegaan omdat hy moes. Sy twyfel nie daaraan dat hy en Larry tot op die laaste oomblik besig was om mense te help, saam met hulle te bid en van Jesus te vertel nie.

Sy het nie St. Paul's of Ground Zero nodig om haar daaraan te herinner nie.

"Dis waar die Twin Towers gestaan het, nè, Mamma?" Sierra skreef haar oë en hou haar hand bokant haar oë sodat sy ten spyte van die verblindende wit van die sneeu kan sien.

"Ja." Sy het nou nog 'n weersin in die verlede tyd, die manier waarop dit op daardie verskriklike gebeure dui. "Dis waar hulle gestaan het."

Sierra kyk na haar en hou haar hand 'n bietjie stywer vas. "Maar dis nie waar Pappa nou is nie. Pappa is in die hemel." Haar trane is weg, die ontsteltenis van die afskeid reeds besig om te vervaag. Sy raak aan haar bors. "Ek kan hom in my hart sien." Sy hou haar kop skeef, haar oë nuuskierig. "Dink Mamma Pappa is bly dat ons Kalifornië toe trek en met oom Clay trou?"

Jamie kyk vir 'n paar oomblikke na haar voete en dan weer op in die lug. In haar gedagtes sien sy Jake se breë glimlag. "Ja, Sierra. Ek dink hy's baie bly." Die vliegtuig is al halfpad na Los Angeles toe Jamie van Aaron se brief onthou. Llangs haar het Sierra aan die slaap geraak; dus gaan sy suutjies te werk. Sy haal die koevert uit, maak dit oop en haal die brief uit.

*Liewe Jamie*

*Ek gaan nie lank wees nie, maar ek het belowe om jou te laat weet as daar iets gebeur het. Wel, daar het.*

Jamie maak haar oë toe en haar hart begin vinniger klop. Wat is dit? Aaron kan tog nie van die een ding praat waaroor hulle altyd verskil het nie. Sy knip haar oë en lees verder.

*Een van die nuwe ouens by die stasie se baba is met 'n hartprobleem gebore. Die ou het ons gevra dat almal wat glo, sal bid. Jy ken my; ek het vir hom gesê ek kan nie bid nie, want ek glo nie. Maar daardie aand het ek die Here gevra om my te wys of Hy regtig daar is, om my te wys of ek nog altyd verkeerd was. En raai wat?*

*Die volgende oggend kom die nuwe ou na my toe en sê: "Jy hoef nie in God te glo nie, Hisel. Hy glo in jou."*

*Dis woord vir woord wat jy vir my gesê het. En ek weet nie, ek het hoendervleis gekry en iets het in my binneste gebeur. Dit was asof ek skielik net geweet het dat God bestaan en dat Hy daar was. Ek probeer nie sê dat ek alles verstaan of weet hoe dit werk nie, maar ek en die ou praat elke dag. Hy het gesê hy gaan vir my 'n Bybel bring.*

*Ek wou maar net hê jy moet weet sodat jy kan aanhou om vir my te bid. Ek weet alreeds dat Jake bid. Ek's bly vir jou, Jamie. Kyk mooi na jouself.*

*Aaron*

*Jamie knip haar oë teen die trane. Dan maak sy hulle toe en laat sak haar kop terug teen die rugleuning. Here ... U is so goed, so getrou. Ek het geweet U sal tot Aaron deurdring, en U het. U laat alles op u tyd gebeur.*

Die kalmerende gedreun van die enjins laat haar ontspan.

Sy maak haar oë oop en kyk deur die venster. Ver onder haar wink klompies liggies, huise waar ouers en kinders mekaar liefhet en saans oor die dag by die werk of skool gesels. Soos dit binnekort met haar en Clay en Sierra gaan wees.

'n Warm vreugde wel in haar op. Die hartseer is verby. Sy sien Clay se gesig voor haar, hoe hy gaan lyk wanneer hulle van die vliegtuig afklim om hulle eens en vir altyd in sy wêreld te vestig. Gedagtes aan hulle toekoms speel voor haar af. Dit gaan so goed wees om hom te sien en vas te hou en 'n troue saam met hom te beplan, soveel pret om haar goed in haar nuwe plek uit te pak en te kyk hoe Sierra en Clay en Wrinkles teepartytjie hou.

*Kies die lewe. Jake se stem weerklink weer in haar hart, gevul met die opregtheid en geloof wat so eie aan hom was toe hy gelewe het, toe hy hare was. Kies die lewe, Jamie. Kies die lewe.*

Sy glimlag en kyk na die slapende figuur van hulle dogtertjie. *Ja, Jake. Ek kies die lewe.*

Die vliegtuigenjins dreun laag in die agtergrond en sy kyk weer deur die venster. Elke berg en veld neem hulle 'n bietjie nader aan Kalifornië. Nader aan Clay. 'n Milddadige sekerheid kom lê in haar hart en bevestig dit wat sy altyd geweet het. Te midde van al die beproewings en tragedies, al die

gebrokenheid en verwarring, berus dit by die mens om die lewe te kies. Die lewe wat van God af kom en waartoe Hy sy kinders geroep het. Dit is haar keuse. Nou en vir altyd.

## A NOTE FROM KAREN

Those of you who read *One Tuesday Morning* know that telling Jamie Bryan's story was something I had to do. That first book came to me almost complete on the afternoon of September 11, 2001, and it stayed in my heart until I wrote it for you.

It was the same way with this sequel.

*Beyond Tuesday Morning* is really the rest of the story, the way the rest of the story might play out for all those touched or changed by tragedy. Like Jamie, all of us will have the chance to choose life. For some of you, that might mean making a recommitment to a dying marriage or looking for ways to encourage your husband or wife.

Choosing life might mean taking time to play with your children. So often we get caught up in the business of raising a family—making vacation plans, buying a house, getting a job, doing housework, fixing up the yard—that we miss the point. Making time with your children and the people you love is definitely a way to choose life.

But the way that is illustrated in this book is vitally important.

I've heard it said that all of us are either leaving a trial, heading into one, or smack in the middle of one. Trials can vary from issues at work to the death of a loved one. In Jamie's case, she was willing to spend her life memorializing the years she'd had with Jake.

But ultimately it was God's Word, combined with words written by Jake, that helped her choose life.

Grief and sorrow are important stages, seasons that we must go through. To some extent we will never be fully rid of either—not when we're dealing with the loss of someone we loved. I hear from hundreds of

you every week—mostly letters of encouragement and offers of prayer, for which I will forever be grateful. But once in a while you tell me of tragic events in your families or communities. When I hear about a car accident or illness or loss, I always pray. I pray for hope and healing wherever possible.

And I pray for life.

Life is God's gift to us. With every sweet breath, we confirm the fact that God has us here for a reason, that He has a plan for our lives. I truly believe that the more we surrender our lives to Him, the more we trust Him with the days He gives us, the better off we'll be. There is such peaceful freedom, such uninhibited joy, in knowing that God Almighty is the reason we woke up today. If we have tomorrow, it's because He has more for us to do.

In that light, it's almost impossible to spend a day bemoaning our situation, unwilling to rejoice. Grief stays with us, but it need not stay *on* us. I think of the apostle Paul, chained in a Roman prison, rats nibbling at his knees. What was he doing? Singing...telling the jailors about Jesus... and writing letters to his friends back home, encouraging them to glorify God with their lives.

If you or someone you love is in a difficult situation, I pray this book has given you hope. But I also pray it sends you looking for the purpose God has for your life. Allow the possibility that whatever you're going through, this too shall pass. Not without pain, not without tears, but with possibility and trust in God.

Things are good on the home front. Kelsey is fifteen and in high school and has just finished cheering for the freshmen football team. Tyler, twelve, is being homeschooled so he can have more time for the arts he's so passionate about. He is very involved in Christian Youth Theater and will audition for all three of the musicals this year. Sean, Josh, EJ, and Austin have just completed a wonderful season of soccer. With Christmas behind us, we're settling in for a productive winter/spring season. We still

do devotions every morning, and I am thrilled to see each of the kids gradually making decisions for Christ that are motivated by their own love for God, their own choices for life.

If you're a believer in Jesus Christ, I pray this book encourages you to keep on fighting the good fight. If you're not, then this may be the chance in a lifetime, the chance to call on Jesus as your Savior, to get to a Bible-believing church and find out about a relationship with the true God of the universe. Trusting Jesus for life is the very first step to choosing life. *Abundant* life. John 10:10 says that the thief comes to kill, steal, and destroy, but Jesus has come to give us life, life to the fullest measure.

Don't waste another day with the thief; rather make the choice to spend your life, from this day on, with the Giver of life. One of my favorite sections of Scripture is Hebrews 12, which encourages us to never give up, but to "run with perseverance the race marked out for us." The race of life. That's what God called Jamie Bryan to do.

It's what He calls each of us to do.

Until next time, I pray God keeps His mighty arms around you, that you feel the presence of His loving touch, His gentle hug, even on the darkest nights. May He bless you and yours and grant you life. Always life.

In His light and love,  
Karen Kingsbury

P.S. My website, [www.KarenKingsbury.com](http://www.KarenKingsbury.com), has become a big part of my ministry. You can leave a prayer request, pray for other readers with specific needs, and meet prayer partners at the Prayer Ministry link. You can get involved in discussions about my books at the Reader Forum link, and you can see how God is using these books to affect the lives of other readers at the Guest Book link.

You can contact me at the website or at my email address:

rtbbykk@aol.com. As always, I love hearing from you and look forward to your letters.

## Outeursbrief

Die eerste boek in hierdie omnibus het op 11 September 2001 amper in sy geheel na my toe gekom, en dit het in my hart gebly totdat ek dit vir julle geskryf het.

Dit was dieselfde met hierdie verhaal.

Die tweede boek is eintlik die beste deel van die verhaal, die moontlike einde van enigiemand se verhaal wat deur tragedie geraak of verander is. Nes Jamie het ons almal die kans om die lewe te kies. Vir sommige van julle beteken dit dalk dat daar opnuut aan 'n wankelende huwelik gewerk moet word; iemand anders weer, moet maniere kry om sy of haar eggenoot by te staan en te bemoedig.

Iemand wat die lewe kies, maak tyd om met sy kinders te speel. Ons raak dikwels so vasgevang in alles wat in en om 'n gesin moet gebeur – ons reël vakansies, koop huis, doen huiswerk, maak tuin – dat ons die eintlike punt mis. Om die lewe te kies, is om vir jou kinders en die mense wat jy liefhet tyd te maak.

Maar die manier waarop dit in hierdie boek geïllustreer word, is baie belangrik.

Daar word gesê dat almal van ons óf besig is om uit 'n beproewing te kom, óf daarheen op pad is, óf ons in die middel van een bevind. Beprowings wissel van werksprobleme tot die afsterwe van 'n geliefde. In Jamie se geval was sy bereid om die res van haar lewe aan die jare te wy wat sy saam met Jake gehad het.

Maar uiteindelik was dit die Here se werk en Jake se eie woorde wat haar gehelp het om die lewe te kies.

Smart en hartseer is belangrike stadiums, seisoene waardeur ons moet gaan. In 'n sekere mate sal ons nooit heeltemal daarvan ontslae wees nie – nie wanneer dit om die verlies van 'n geliefde gaan nie. Ek hoor weekliks van honderde van julle – hoofsaaklik briewe van bemoediging en beloftes om vir my te bid, en ek sal vir altyd daarvoor dankbaar wees. Maar af en toe vertel julle my van tragiese gebeure in julle families of gemeenskappe.

Wanneer ek van 'n motorongeluk of siekte of verlies hoor, bid ek altyd vir hoop en genesing waar dit moontlik is.

En ek bid vir lewe.

Die lewe is God se geskenk aan ons. Elke asemteug is 'n bevestiging dat God ons met 'n doel hier geplaas het, dat Hy 'n plan met ons lewe het. Hoe meer ons ons lewe aan Hom toewy en hoe meer ons Hom met ons lewe vertrou, hoe



beter is ons daaraan toe. Daar is so 'n salige vryheid, so 'n uitbundige blydschap in die wete dat God die Almagtige die rede is waarom ons elke dag wakker word. As daar 'n môre of oormôre is, is dit omdat God ons meer wil gee om te doen.

Teen hierdie agtergrond is dit amper onmoontlik om ons lot te bekla en onwillig te wees om die Here te prys. Die feit dat hartseer gebeure ons bybly, beteken nie dit hoef oor ons te heers nie. Dink aan die apostel Paulus wat 'n Romeinse gevangene was. Wat het hy gedoen toe hy in haglike omstandighede in 'n tronk gesit het? Hy het gesing ... sy bewaarders van Jesus vertel ... en briewe aan sy vriende geskryf waarin hy hulle aanspoor om die Here met hulle lewe te verheerlik.

As jy of iemand vir wie jy lief is, in 'n moeilike situasie is, bid ek dat hierdie boek jou hoop gegee het. Maar ek bid ook dat dit jou aanspoor om uit te vind wat God se doel met jou lewe is. Enigiets wat jy op die oomblik deurgaans, sal verbygaan. Nie sonder pyn of tranes nie, maar met 'n verwagting en vertroue in God.

Dit gaan goed op die tuisfront. Kelsey is vyftien en op hoërskool en was die afgelope seisoen 'n rasieler vir die junior voetbalspan. Tyler, twaalf, ontvang tuisonderrig sodat hy ekstra tyd vir die kunste het waarvoor hy so passievol is. Hy is baie betrokke in Christelike kinderteater en sal hierdie jaar vir al drie musiekblyspele oudisies aflê. Sean, Josh, EJ en Austin het pas 'n wonderlike sokkerseisoen agter die rug. So aan die begin van 'n nuwe jaar maak ons gereed vir 'n produktiewe winter/lenteseisoen. Soggens hou ons steeds huisgodsdienste en dis wonderlik om te sien hoe elkeen van die kinders se besluit vir Christus deur hulle liefde vir God gemotiveer word.

As jy in Jesus Christus glo, bid ek dat hierdie boek jou sal aanspoor om die goeie stryd te stry. As jy nog nie glo nie, is dit dalk 'n unieke kans om Jesus as jou Verlosser aan te roep, om by 'n Skrifgetroue kerk aan te sluit en 'n verhouding met die ware God van die heelal aan te knoop. Om Jesus vir lewe te vertrou, is die heel eerste tree om die lewe te kies. Die lewe in *oorvloed*. In Johannes 10:10 lees ons dat die dief kom om te steel, slag en uit te roei, maar dat Jesus gekom het om die lewe in oorvloed vir ons te gee.

Moenie nog 'n dag met die dief mors nie; neem eerder die besluit om jou lewe van vandag af met die Gewer van die lewe deur te bring. Een van my gunsteling-Bybelgedeeltes is Hebreërs 12 waarin ons aangemoedig word om die wedloop wat voor ons lê, met volharding te hardloop. Die wedloop van die lewe. Dis waartoe die Here Jamie geroep het.

Dis waartoe Hy ons almal roep.

Ek bid dat God jou in sy sterk arms sal toevou en dat jy sy liefdevolle aanraking en tere omhelsing altyd, selfs in die donkerste nag, sal ervaar. Mag Hy jou en jou geliefdes seën en jou lewe gee. Die ewige lewe.

In sy lig en liefde

Karen Kingsbury

Ns. My webtuiste, [www.KarenKingsbury.com](http://www.KarenKingsbury.com), het 'n groot deel van my

bediening geword. Jy kan 'n gebedsversoek instuur, vir ander lesers bid en ander bidders ontmoet. Jy kan deelneem aan gesprekke oor my boeke, en sien hoe die Here hierdie boeke gebruik om die lewe van ander lesers te beïnvloed. Kontak my by die webtuiste of by my e-posadres: [rtabykk@aol.com](mailto:rtabykk@aol.com). Soos altyd is dit wonderlik om van julle te hoor en sien ek uit na julle briewe.

## **Boekklub- of studiegidsvrae**

1. Waarom het Jamie as vrywilliger by St. Paul's gewerk?
2. Hoe het sy ander mense deur haar werk gehelp?
3. Wat het die Here deur haar werk in haar tot stand gebring?
4. Waarom het sy verplig gevoel om in kaptein Aaron Hisel belang te stel?
5. Watter waarskuwingsteken was daar dat dit dalk nie die regte verhouding vir haar was nie?
6. Wat kon Jamie leer uit die manier waarop Sierra met haar lewe voortgegaan het?
7. Watter lesse het Jamie by Jake in hierdie seisoen van verandering geleer?
8. Het die Here jou al ooit voor die keuse van die lewe of die dood gestel? Verduidelik.
9. Wat het jy gekies en wat was die gevolge?
10. Jamie het die grootste deel van haar vroeëre lewe in vrees gelewe. In watter opsig het hierdie geneigdheid later weer in haar lewe opgeduik?
11. Hoe het Jamie uiteindelik haar vrese oorwin? Watter stappe het sy geneem?
12. Was daar al 'n tyd toe jou vrees gemaak het dat jy nie iets gedoen het wat jy wou doen nie? Vertel.
13. Het jy daardie vrees op 'n latere tydstip te bowe gekom? Indien wel, hoe?
14. Om die lewe te kies, behels soms ook dat 'n mens die moed moet hê om te sê wat gesê moet word – hetsy dit 'n liefdesverklaring of 'n verskoning teenoor 'n ouer of kind of vriend is. Hoe het Joe Reynolds daartoe bygedra dat Jamie die lewe aangegryp het?
15. Wat sou jy doen om die lewe te kies as vandag jou laaste dag op aarde was? Hoe sou jy die lewe aangryp? Maak werk daarvan en verheerlik God deur daaglik sô te lewe.

